

ZAYDEN STONE

MYTHICAL CREATURES AND MAGICAL BEASTS

*An Illustrated Book of Monsters from
Timeless Folktales, Folklore and Mythology*

VOLUME 2



LEGENDARY LORES

MYTHICAL CREATURES & MAGICAL BEASTS

*An Illustrated Book of Monsters from Timeless
Folktales, Folklore and Mythology: Volume 2*

Zayden Stone
The Legendary Lores Series

Spent Pens

A Summary

Have you ever been curious about the mythical creatures that are often referenced in pop-culture?

Whether it is Dwayne 'the Rock' Johnson playing an oversized scorpion man in *The Mummy Returns* and *The Scorpion King*, or the character of Anansi in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*; these magical creatures have a deep connection to the mythologies and folktales of ancient cultures.

This book is an attempt to tell their stories. Where they came from, what relevance they serve in mythology. Why are some so obscure, while others become pop-culture marvels?

Dive deep into their stories retold by Zayden Stone, and re-imagined by artist, Herdhian.

About the Author

Zayden Stone is a self proclaimed folklorist. As a child, while he watched his friends play with action figurines, he was mesmerised by the world of mythology. He let the stories of ancient civilizations transport him to imagined worlds where mythical creatures roamed the planet freely. He would often re-imagine these stories told from the perspective of these magical beasts and would wonder what they would have had to say.

It has been a life long dream of Stone's to combine all the creatures that he has grown up reading about, into a comprehensive illustrated guide for others to learn from. This book is an ode to his own childhood fascination for ancient tales, and the second volume in a two-volume series.

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Front & Back Cover and Interior Artwork by: Herdhian

An ode to the imagination of people and the wild stories their minds tell.

- Zayden Stone

Contents

<u>Title Page</u>	
<u>Copyright</u>	
<u>Dedication</u>	
<u>Introduction</u>	
<u>Section One Arthropoda</u>	
<u>Chapter 1: Jorōgumo</u>	
<u>Chapter 2: Scorpion Man</u>	
<u>Chapter 3: Anansi</u>	
<u>Section Two An Ancient Aviary</u>	
<u>Chapter 4: Itsumade</u>	
<u>Chapter 5: Sirin</u>	
<u>Chapter 6: Strix</u>	
<u>Chapter 7: Impundulu</u>	
<u>Chapter 8: Huma</u>	
<u>Chapter 9: Simurgh</u>	
<u>Section Three Cryptic Canines</u>	
<u>Chapter 10: Vrykolakas</u>	
<u>Chapter 11: Adlet</u>	
<u>Chapter 12: Kishi</u>	
<u>Chapter 13: Psoglav</u>	
<u>Chapter 14: Ahuizotl</u>	
<u>Section Four The Eternal Hiss</u>	
<u>Chapter 15: Níðhöggr</u>	
<u>Chapter 16: Ajatar</u>	
<u>Chapter 17: Zilant</u>	
<u>Chapter 18: Grootslang</u>	
<u>Chapter 19: Kiyohime</u>	
<u>Chapter 20: Scylla</u>	
<u>Chapter 21: Zahhak</u>	
<u>Section Five The Unusual Ungulates</u>	

[Chapter 22: Tikbalang](#)

[Chapter 23: Uchchaisravas](#)

[Chapter 24: Nuckelavee](#)

[Chapter 25: Longma](#)

[Chapter 26: Abada](#)

[Chapter 27: Erymanthian boar](#)

[Chapter 28: Indrik](#)

[Section Six | Aquatic Beasts](#)

[Chapter 29: Vodyanoy](#)

[Chapter 30: Melusine](#)

[Chapter 31: Abaia](#)

[Chapter 32: Adaro](#)

[Chapter 33: Bukavac](#)

[Chapter 34: Timingila](#)

[Chapter 35: Rusalka](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[References](#)

[About the Author](#)

[About the Artist](#)

Introduction

Ancient Greeks called it mythos; the ancient Hindu civilizations called it mithya. The similarity of these words alone is reason enough to believe that so many ancient cultures' orally told tales were often spread by travellers and tradesfolk. Both mythos and mithya were often known as the polar opposite of 'absolute truths' or as the Hindus called it - *sat*. One cannot deny the relation of myth to certain truths. Mythology turned into phantasmagoric tall tales to explain the reality of the world as observed by many ancient cultures. Why did volcanoes erupt? What caused eclipses? While one cannot call myth a truth in the true sense of the word, the best way to explain it would be that mythology was often a perspective - or a version of the truth.

While it would be modern day scientific elitism to believe that the people of the ancient world actually believed in virgin births or flying horses; snakes that engulfed the entire world or serpents that swallowed moons; it would be fair to say that mythological tales were intentionally hyperbolic in nature to drive home a certain point or moral. Think about it? Which stories would have had a higher chance of continued tellings and retellings over generations - a story about a single headed, two handed man that had to fight lions and tigers and bears, or the story of a demi-God with herculean strength battling a multi headed sea serpent and a mammoth sized boar?

Folktale and folklore, used interchangeably throughout this book, are very similar to the concept of mythological tales. However it is the link to the divine that separates mythology from folktales. At the core both mythology and folklore are hinged on the idea of creating a sense of community through campfire stories. At the risk of oversimplifying, myth is often sacred, and folklore is a collection of fictional tales.

The scale of mythology and folklore also often distinguishes the two. Mythology is considered to have a much larger scale than folklore, and involves grand events and characters. For example, stories about how the universe began would be termed as mythology. While both mythology and folklore involve fictional stories and characters, mythical characters are often immortal beings who fight fantastical monsters.

Folklore is usually smaller scale stories and involves local surroundings, such as an explanation how a lake was formed, or the birth of a royal lineage. The types of adventures and deeds performed by these characters are also frequently smaller in scale, such as a clash of two families that gives a town its name.

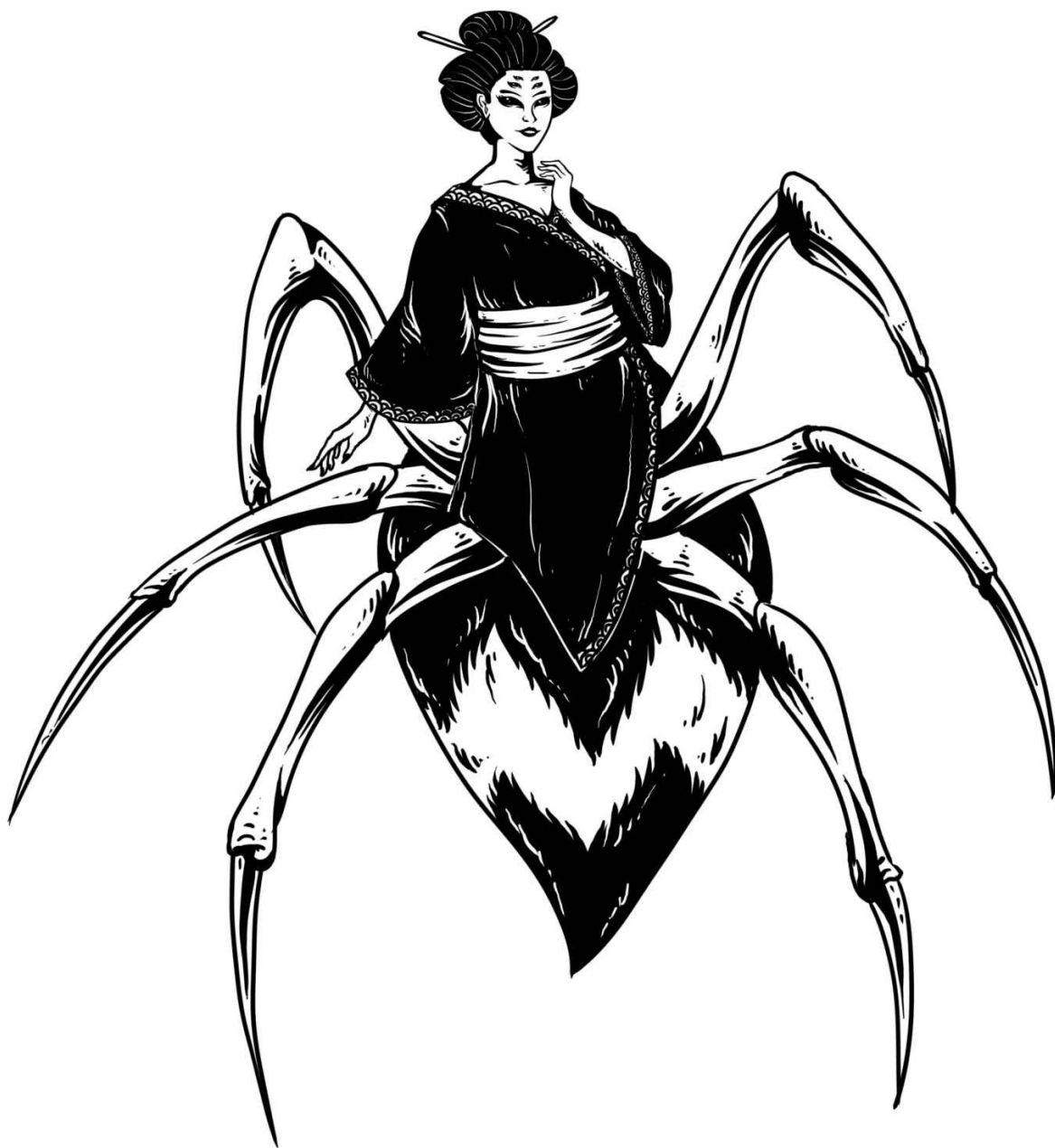
As far as mythological beasts and folktales creatures go, however, the distinction tends to be more blurry. Some creatures exist to warn children of nearby and everyday dangers in folktales, while the mythological beasts often showcase Gods and heroes as legends and serve explanations of a more ethical or moral nature.

This book, like the first volume, goes through six sections, each covering a unique type of supernatural beast. By breaking the book down in this way, it becomes easier to draw parallels between different ancient cultures.

Section One | Arthropoda

Chapter 1: Jorōgumo

Origin: JAPANESE FOLKLORE



A wild knocking on the door woke the newly wed couple. The husband looked out the window to see that the torrential storm had not weathered. The wife couldn't understand who would be out on a night like this, and at an ungodly hour such as this. They both walked towards the door, where they could now hear a faint 'please open the door' in between the pounding on the frail wooden door. Their mind was comforted at the sound of a woman. They hurried to the door to open the door, where they saw a woman, drenched to the bone; her back hunched to shield what could only be a baby in her arms. 'Please help', she implored 'My baby won't survive the night'. The couple was quick to let her in. She asked if they could hold her baby as she managed her dripping clothes. Curious to see if the baby was breathing, the couple unwrapped the dry fabric. Before the couple could even let out a blood curdling scream, tiny little spiders had already made their way all over their face. As the hours of the night passed, the couple could feel themselves being eaten away from the inside, but the worst was yet to come. Their visitor had transformed into a massive beast with the torso of a spider. The last sound the couple ever heard was the sound of a biwa instrument as she wrapped them within her web before she dug her fangs right into their hearts.

This is the tale of Jorogumo; Japanese mythology's infamous half woman half spider demon. Jorogumo, whose name translates to 'binding bride', are said to come to be when a spider comes to be 400 years old; and on its 400th birthday, the spider gains strange powers and grows much larger. The Jorogumo can now change its shape to a beautiful woman. It uses this shape, and its skill at playing the biwa instrument, to lure victims into traps. Many tall tales mention that she always ensnares handsome young men, while other tales mention no such discrimination when it comes time for her to feast. Once trapped, she binds her prey's feet and stores them away for later feeding.

In their spider form, the Jorōgumo are usually between two to three centimeters long, and are in fact real life spiders found in modern day Japan, and are known to have beautiful, colorful, and vibrant bodies. Mythologically speaking, their primary strength lies in their threads, which are strong enough to hold a fully grown man.

One of the most famous creatures from around the world, the Jorōgumo is known to live in caves, forests, or empty houses. They can seduce a man with their conversational skills and they are indifferent, cruel, emotionless and heartless.

The Jorōgumo can be identified by looking at their reflection in a mirror. They will look like spiders even when they are not an animal- the human form of such a creature is just as dangerous.

The story of Jorogumo is one that has been told for generations and it has changed many times in the different villages. Stories about this mythical creature can be found all over Asia, from Japan to China. The most common tale is that she appears as a beautiful woman or young girl and lures unsuspecting travelers into her home with the promise of love, only to then become an old woman who binds them with silk until they die.

In the legend of Kashikobuchi, Sendai, there was a Jorōgumo who resided in a waterfall. The people of the area outwitted her on being aware of her presence, by cleverly using a tree stump as a decoy. The Jorōgumo one day grasped the stump and pulled it into the water, but soon realised that it was being deceived. It responded with the words "*clever, clever*". The Japanese term, *Kashikobuchi*, originates from this myth, and it means clever abyss.

There is another common tale in Japanese mythology that relates to this version of the Jorōgumo. It begins with an eel that lived in the clever abyss, who one day visited a man Genbe after shapeshifting into a beautiful woman. She warned him that the jorōgumo of the abyss was going to attack her the next day, and claimed that she could never match the jorōgumo in power and she needed Genbe's assistance to defeat the beast. Genbe promised to help her, but as the new day dawned, he cowered and shut himself in his house. The eel lost her fight with the jorōgumo, and on learning this Genbe eventually died of insanity from grief and guilt.

The Jorōgumo appears frequently in pop-culture. In the book *In Darkness Unmasked*, the Jorōgumo appears as the primary antagonist killing female musicians, only to take on their appearance as a disguise to lure male musicians. In the animated show *Wasurenagumo*, the protagonist is a young Jorōgumo child. She's trapped within a book by a priest, and is released later, to embark on a journey.

The Jorōgumo is one of the most dangerous shapeshifters in Japanese mythology. It takes on qualities of a beautiful woman to trap unsuspecting men. This myth has been spread as warning for many decades and people still take heed today.

Chapter 2: Scorpion Man

Origin:BABYLONIAN FOLKLORE



Gilgamesh had been wandering the wilderness for some time—he had lost track of how long, but he knew it was since he lost his best friend. At first, he hadn't been able to accept that his friend was dead. He'd stayed with the body, refusing to believe it, until the passage of time and progressing rot had made it obvious he wasn't coming back. After the funeral, he had ambled away, reliving the many adventures they had shared together. Now his friend was gone forever, and that made him realize acutely that, one day, he would be too.

Finally, Gilgamesh had realized what he must do. He pulled his lion skin tighter around his shoulders and walked down towards the opening of a tunnel between two mountains. He must get through—to discover the secret to eternal life.

He could see two gatekeepers standing guard. Maybe if he explained that he was two-thirds god, they would let him pass. He realized he was not as close as he thought; the gatekeepers were horrifically tall. As he approached, he saw they had powerful bird legs ending in sharp talons and human faces watching him with disinterest. One had its arms folded across its chest. As it turned to say something to the other gatekeeper, he saw its shiny black-shelled body ending in a terrifying scorpion tail; he swore he could see a pearl of poison on the end. It was a pair of scorpion-people, and he could not imagine they were about to let him through.

In the Babylonian creation myth, the goddess Tiamat made eleven monsters to avenge the murder of her husband, the god Apsu; one of these monsters was the scorpion-man. Scorpion-men feature in Babylonian poetry etched on clay tablets, and they are popular images used in many situations, from palaces to homes, thrones to ceramics, and murals to stamp seals.

To the modern reader, the name scorpion-man usually conjures up an image of a giant many-legged arachnid with pincers and tail, topped with the torso of a man. However, the original Babylonian version of the scorpion-man was quite different, and there were several distinct types. There were also scorpion-women, as told in the Epic of Gilgamesh. The scorpion-people guarding the gates to the underworld were a male and

female pair—they did ultimately let the hero-king Gilgamesh through to continue his quest for immortality.

Nevertheless, images of scorpion-people were of bearded men, and they were depicted in several different ways within the same period. The key identifying feature that they all had in common was the tail of a scorpion and that they were all two-legged. The most human-looking type of scorpion-man had a human head and torso, two human arms and legs, and the body of a bird or scorpion extending at the back, with a scorpion tail. This type of scorpion-man is almost always shown with their arms extended upwards in a supportive pose. They are often supporting part of a throne.

The second type of scorpion-man has human arms on a human body, as above, but it has bird legs and talons. It usually holds weapons, such as a bow and arrow, and performs a protective, guarding role. The final type of scorpion-man has the body and wings of a bird, with two bird legs and no arms. Like the others, it has a man's bearded head and a scorpion tail. They all seemed to serve an apotropaic role to ward off evil.

On the 6th Century BC Babylonian world map in the British Museum, scorpion-men are listed as one of the types of creature that lives in the 'otherworld,' beyond the earth. Scorpion-men greet the dead when they enter the underworld, and they also guard the gates of Mount Mashu, the seat of the gods and entrance to the underworld. Mount Mashu is also the twin peaks of sunrise and sunset, which is why scorpion-men are considered the assistants of the sun god.

Scorpion-men are also called Girtablullu, *girtab* meaning scorpion, and *lullu* meaning uncivilized-man. After Tiamat's monsters were defeated by the god Marduk, the scorpion-men took on their supportive and protective roles on the side of the gods. *The Enuma Elish* clay tablets explain the role of Marduk in the Babylon creation myth and mention the first scorpion-man:

Before time began, gods came forth from the female and male primordial entities of the universe, Tiamat and Apsu. But the new generation of gods soon became unruly and out of control. Apsu proposed they be annihilated, but Tiamat was reluctant to destroy something they had created. The new gods overheard the conversation and killed Apsu and taunted Tiamat for her inaction. Tiamat, bereft at the loss of her partner, created eleven hybrid monsters and armed them for battle, one of which was the scorpion-man. There were also fearsome hybrids of snakes, lions, bulls, and fish. This made Tiamat a formidable opponent, and the other gods were intimidated, all except one. The god Marduk agreed to fight Tiamat on the condition that he would be made supreme god. With no other choice, the other gods consented. After brutal combat, Marduk defeated Tiamat and captured her monsters. They either entered the service of the gods, like the scorpion-man or were cast into the sea.

Historically, scorpion imagery was widely used to avert evil influences and bad luck, and the scorpion-men seemed to fulfill this role as popular motifs on a wide range of objects. They symbolize resolute defense and security for royalty and laypeople alike. Created to be frightening members of a monster army, they are fearsome guardians and protectors.

Chapter 3: Anansi

Origin: WEST AFRICAN FOLKLORE AND MYTHOLOGY



Ntikuma sat on the ground, watching his father trying to climb a tall tree. For some reason, he had a bottle gourd fastened to his stomach, tied on with a string creeper. Maybe this was something to do with his father's quest to collect all the wisdom of the world. 'Father, what are you doing?' asked Ntikuma. But his father did not reply; he was struggling to climb the tree because the bottle gourd kept getting in the way of his many legs. He climbed up a little and then fell down on his rump yet again. Ntikuma made a suggestion, 'Father, open your eyes! Why don't you tie the gourd onto your back so you can climb?'

After another failed attempt with the gourd on his stomach, Ntikuma's father followed his young son's advice and climbed easily to the top of the tree. He sat on a high branch and spoke to Ntikuma. 'I thought I had collected all the wisdom of the world in this gourd,' he said, holding it aloft. 'I was going to hide it up here for safekeeping. But you have shown me some wisdom I left behind, so it all seems a bit pointless now...' And with that, Anansi the spider threw his gourd as far as he could, spilling wisdom out all over the land.

Anansi is a mischievous spider from West Africa and features in many stories that explain moral values and good behavior, such as sharing wisdom. A character originating in Ghana, in the Akan language, *anansi* means 'spider.' As a spider, Anansi's head is much smaller than his body, and this is because spirits taught him how to detach the top of his skull, which he accidentally stuck to his rear end. In some stories, Anansi and his wife, Aso, appear as human, so they have the ability to shapeshift. Anansi is usually depicted as a black spider with a cheeky anthropomorphized face. Rather than his appearance, it is his character that is important to the many tales he features in.

Anansi is a clever trickster who is adept at turning his weaknesses or failings to his advantage. Anansi stories spread from Africa with the slave trade to the Caribbean and beyond, so there are a wide variety of tales. There is much debate whether the Anansi stories are folklore or myth since in some areas

Anansi is considered the son of gods, while others argue that Anansi is not worshipped, and divine links are thus not relevant to most of the stories. So even though most Anansi stories are considered folklore, some have a divine element like the following:

Anansi loved to talk and thought he would make an excellent storyteller, so one day, he visited Nyame, the sky god, who was the keeper of all stories. Anansi respectfully asked Nyame if he could buy the stories. Nyame replied that the cost was a python, a leopard, a fairy, and some hornets. Many people had asked for the stories, but none had been able to pay. Nyame was sure this was an impossible task and that the stories would remain in his possession.

Anansi went home and made plans with his mother and wife. His wife gave him many excellent ideas, and he followed her advice. To capture the python, he piqued his vanity by saying he was not longer than a palm frond. While he ostensibly measured the python, Anansi tied him to the frond. For the leopard, he trapped him in a pit and hit him on the head. Next, Anansi pretended it was raining and tricked the hornets into a hollow bottle gourd for shelter, and closed the lid.

Now to catch a fairy, you have to be particularly clever. Anansi's wife made a little doll, and Anansi covered it in sticky sap. His mother gave him some mashed yam in a small pot to tempt the fairies. When Anansi had laid the doll and yam mash out under a tree, he hid. Soon a fairy came and spoke to the doll, asking if she could share the yam mash. The fairy became very cross when the doll did not reply and slapped her. The fairy's hand was instantly stuck. She tried to free herself with her other hand, but that became stuck too.

So Anansi took the python, leopard, hornets, and a very angry fairy up to the sky god. Nyame was impressed and gave

all of the stories to Anansi, and that is how they became known as spider stories instead of sky god stories.

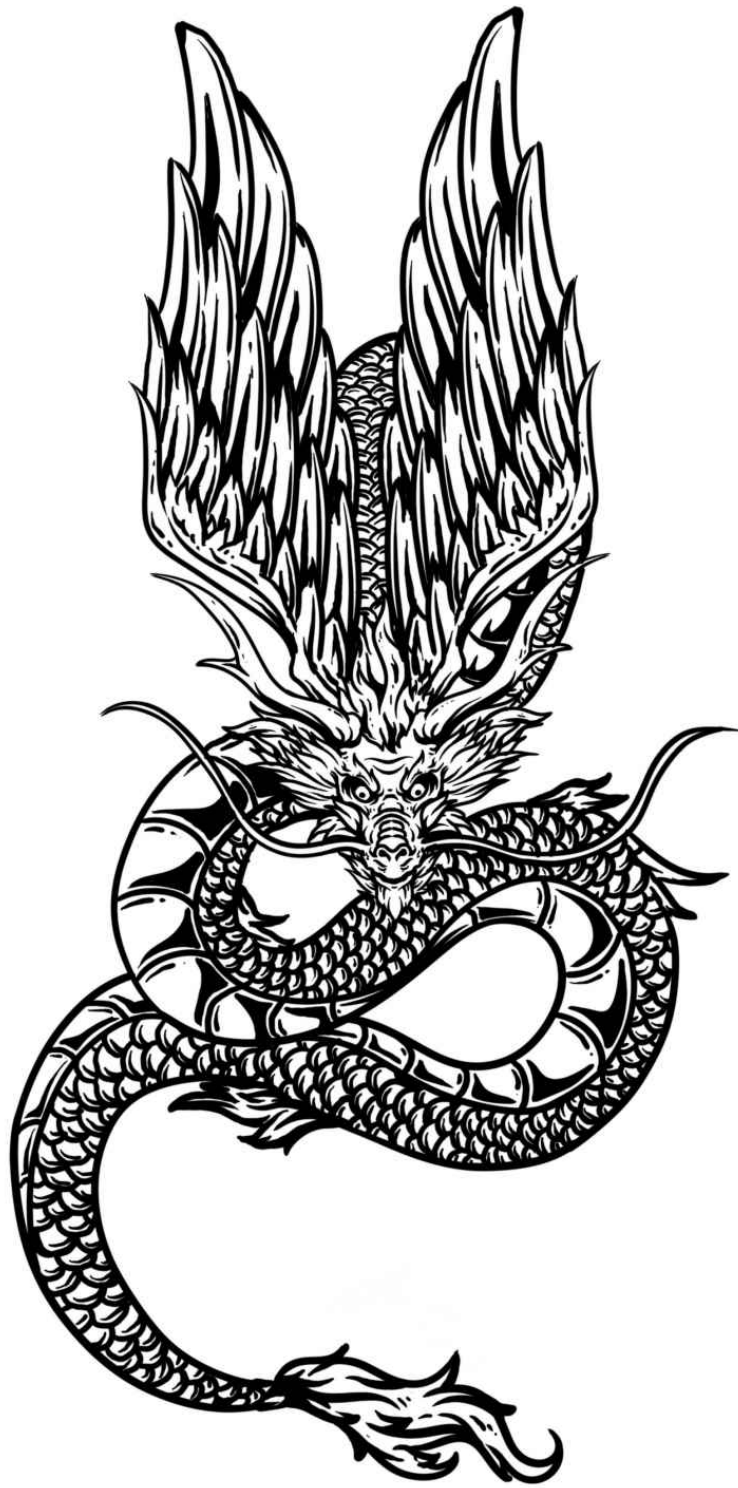
Some stories relate Nyame as Anansi's father and his mother as the earth goddess. Tired of his son's mischief, Nyame turned Anansi into a spider with only his wits to rely on. A common thread across all Anansi stories is thinking your way out of life's day-to-day problems. Sometimes Anansi teaches us a lesson, and sometimes other characters teach Anansi a lesson, and we learn from his mistakes.

Often presenting philosophical lessons in a comedic and informative way, Anansi the spider symbolizes cunning, humor, mischief, and perseverance in problem-solving. Though Anansi is known to deceive others for his own ends, his actions prompt laughter as a tool to convey the intended message. As Anansi often outwits larger opponents, he can be seen as an important symbol of resistance against oppression.

Section Two | An Ancient Aviary

Chapter 4: Itsumade

Origin: JAPANESE LEGEND



In Ancient Japan, a terrible plague was ravaging the land, leaving a trail of disease, suffering, and death in its wake. The ruling nobility hid in the palace and did little to improve the lives of the living or give dignity to the dead as the torment continued. The dead were not laid to rest nor given proper burials, leaving their spirits restless, seeking revenge and justice.

Late one night, a terrifying creature flew against a dark and stormy sky. This strange, enormous bird had a beaked human-like face and a long reptilian body. It flapped its feathered black wings and cast an ominous shadow as it flew over the land. It circled above the Imperial Palace, and a hideous screech filled the air to call attention to the anguish below, "Itsumade! Itsumade!" To hear its piercing cry was a torment to not only the ears but to the mind as well. It returned night after night, its shriek striking panic and fear into the hearts of everyone who heard it. The monster thrashed its wings and bared its razor-sharp teeth as it shrieked through each stormy night. What had summoned this beast into the sky? For how long would it reign in terror? The nobles hid in the palace below, panicked and afraid that they may never know their freedom again, desperate for the first signs of the morning light...

"Itsumade! Itsumade!"

Translated into English, the call of "*itsumade*" means "*until when?*" and is what gives the Itsumade its chilling name. Itsumade is a legendary monster with a jigsaw of body parts. It has a human face but with a bird-like beak lined with sharp and jagged teeth and a reptilian body akin to a dragon, with clawed talons and enormous wings with a span of almost five meters. It is a striking and terrifying figure who appears in the sky only at night.

According to Japanese legend, the Itsumade is drawn toward the torment of deceased victims of terrible or violent circumstances, such as plague, starvation, or deadly battles.

While this creature remains shrouded in mystery, what we do know is enough to send a shiver down the spine. The Itsumade is called towards the plight of others to feed on the lamentation of the dead. It appears in the night sky to demand recognition for the victims' suffering and the suffering of others. The Itsumade would circle the sky all night long, its screams unending, frightening and shaming those down below into seeking justice for those who have been left to suffer. The Itsumade was drawn to situations where little was done to ease the victims' suffering, or souls that have passed away have not been properly laid to rest.

In some legends, the Itsumade is a tormented soul of a deceased victim. Their spirits are vengeful and are seeking retribution for the injustice they suffered when they died. They take on the form of an Itsumade to get revenge for the dire circumstances of their own lives and deaths.

The first tale of the Itsumade appeared in the Japanese epic text "*The Taiheiki*" around 1334 in the Kenmu era. A plague was sweeping through the country, causing many deaths and untold suffering among the people. Whole villages were falling with no one to bury the dead. Every night throughout the epidemic, the Itsumade appeared and circled above the Shishinden, the Imperial Palace and cried out, "Itsumade! Itsumade!", "Until when? Until when?" For how much longer must these people suffer? For how much longer must these corpses lie unburied?

The Itsumade struck great fear into the nobility who felt ashamed of their inaction, and they knew that they must respond. Thinking back through history, the nobles remembered the great warrior-poet Minamoto no Yorimasa. He had famously slain the *nue*, another hybrid monster from Japanese legend comprising some of the most frightening aspects of wild animals, including snake, monkey, and tiger features. Minamoto no Yorimasa, the warrior poet, was so successful he gained the

moniker the Master of Arrows and was celebrated long after his death.

So the Imperial Court summoned the best warrior of the day, Okijiro Zaemon Hiroari, to the palace. They hoped he could slay the Itsumade like Minamoto no Yorimasa had slain the *nue*. When night fell, the Itsumade was circling above when Hiroari armed his bow with a whistling arrow. Hiroari was an expert archer: he shot the terrifying monster out of the sky. As it plummeted to the ground, the city was saved from the nights of terror.

In celebration of his triumph over the Itsumade, Okijiro Zaemon Hiroari was renamed Mayumi Hiroari. Mayumi translates to *true bow*, awarded in honor of his skillful archery on that fateful night against the Itsumade. The nobles of the Imperial Palace tried to make up for their neglect of the villagers. They arranged for the bodies to be buried lest another Itsumade might come to take its place. Mayumi Hiroari's grave stands in Mayumi City in the Fukuoka Prefecture of Japan after his life as a famous and celebrated warrior. Itsumade has no such monuments of dedication. Still, the fear that they can strike into the hearts of the living has been passed down throughout the centuries.

Chapter 5: Sirin

Origin: SLAVIC FOLKLORE



Maksim heard it first; it was a beautiful song. He dropped his tools to the ground and searched the skies, looking for the source of the vocalizations. He noticed a huge owl sitting in an apple tree, even though it was midday, and he was pretty sure owls did not have a voice like that. He moved closer, but the bird flew away, still singing. He ran after it; he had to know what it was saying to him. It was so enchanting, he could think of nothing else. All his daily concerns fell away, like taking off a heavy coat, and he felt light and joyful.

He ran and ran and saw that the bird was perched again in another tree; this time, it was facing him. And it had the lovely face of a woman; a small crown was perched on top of its dark plumage, topping off its serious expression as it sang its melodious song. Maksim was enraptured and could not look away. When the bird spread its wings and flew off again, he blissfully followed it. At the very back of his mind was a warning: this was the Sirin, don't follow it to your death. But he paid the half-thought no heed and blindly followed the bird as it flew out to sea.

Sirin is a dark-colored eerie bird, usually an owl, with the head and sometimes chest of a woman. She is famous for her sweet, captivating song, which is so engaging that it has a mesmerizing effect and leads people to their ruin. Sirin's song was intended for the benefit of saints, giving them divine encouragement or messages, but mortals could not survive it and would lose their minds. Hearing Sirin's song made mortals forget all impermanent things and blindly follow her, even listening until they died in rapture. For this reason, people were said to try to scare Sirin away with loud noises which she could not stand, such as ringing bells and cannon fire. People attempting to scare Sirin away by these methods can be seen depicted in old woodblock prints. The same images show that Sirin has wings but no arms, whereas her sister Alkonost, who

sometimes accompanies her, is often depicted with arms as well as wings.

The similarity of the names Sirin and Siren is not thought to be a coincidence. Just like her sister Alkonost, Sirin has been influenced by Greek mythology. The Greek Sirens used mesmerizing songs to lure unsuspecting sailors to their doom, similar to Sirin, and were also part woman, part bird. However, the Greek Sirens were more malicious in their intent. During the Middle Ages, Greek culture traveled northwards, and it is only natural that this included Greek myths.

In earlier pagan times, peasants' cottages were often adorned with pairs of wooden carvings of Sirin and Alkonost as they were considered protective birds of good fortune. The carvings would guard the entrance to the household, Alkonost protecting it by day, and Sirin by night. As time went on, their personalities diverged, and they came to represent different aspects.

In traditional pagan folklore, Sirin and her sister are both from the otherworld island of Buyan, or Vyraj, a type of paradise where birds fly during winter migration and the souls of the dead reside when their earthly lives are over.

In the Slavic villages of ancient Europe, the day of Apple Spas was always celebrated to mark the beginning of harvest time at the end of the summer when autumn began. Until the Apple Spas day, Sirin, with her stern face, was said to inhabit the earthly realm. She would sit in the apple trees and sing a melancholy song, her tears falling onto the trees and growing fruit. No one could eat the apples before Apple Spas in case they were contaminated with Sirin's sorrow. On the day of Apple Spas, Alkonost, with her kind face, would fly into the orchard from paradise. She would laugh and sing a joyful song in the early afternoon, dispelling all misery and imbuing the fruit with healthful or even magical healing properties. After Alkonost's

visit, the villagers would harvest the apples and celebrate their good fortune. They considered Alkonost a sign that the strength of love and faith was more important than money and power represented by Sirin.

At one time, it was said that Sirin only appeared to happy people because it brought them heavenly joy to hear her fabulous song. Sirin was said to be fleeting and pass quickly, just like happiness, which is why happiness and Sirin were both so hard to find.

When Christianity was introduced to the Slavic countries, Sirin was one of the creatures absorbed from Slavic folklore into Russian orthodoxy. Being able to keep some of their favorite beliefs persuaded more people to accept the new religion of Christianity. With the advent of Christianity, Sirin's home was transferred to the Garden of Eden instead of Buyan Island or the paradise of Vyraj. This is why Sirin and Alkonost are both described as birds of paradise in later writings. Over time they became more well-known for their contrasting personalities; Alkonost was seen as good, while Sirin was associated with darker qualities, some even saying she was the messenger of the underworld. Because of this, Sirin became considered a harbinger of death.

Chapter 6: Strix

Origin: GREEK Mythology



Carradora watched as the woman, carrying a young baby, clambered up the path towards her home. It was a steep and difficult route, but Carradora had no desire to live closer to the town. An arduous trek, combined with her infamous reputation, meant that only people who seriously needed help sought her out. It cut down on the time-wasters, usually.

The woman, out of breath, stood before her with a sickly infant. The child was a pretty thing but very pale, and Carradora knew exactly what the woman was about to tell her. The child was losing color and getting worse each night, becoming weaker and weaker every day. Carradora had seen it before, and it angered her that other witches couldn't leave the innocent alone. If you needed to drink blood, take it from someone who deserved it. The child had long red scratches on her face, made by a sharp beak. If the mother followed her instructions precisely, Carradora would be able to save the child from the nightly visits of the Strix—before it was too late.

The Strix craves human flesh and blood, particularly from children. Considered an owl, *strix* means screech-owl in Greek. Though mentioned often, the Strix's appearance was detailed once. Ovid described it as voracious with a large head, staring eyes, tearing beak, and hooked claws. Other sources say its beak was golden yellow and very sharp for feeding on live prey; it preferred blood but also feasted on entrails. The Strix had dark gray or speckled feathers that could be used in love potions, and its name was invoked in curses. Seeing or hearing the Strix was an evil omen because it symbolized civil unrest and death.

The mythical Strix was nocturnal and could be heard making terrifying piercing shrieks from the rooftops and trees. However, another creature screeches in the night, and the first tale of the Strix reveals how it was initially conceived when a woman was punished for not conforming to society:

Ares, the Greek god of courage and war, had a mortal granddaughter named Polyphonte. Polyphonte went to join Artemis, the goddess of the hunt and wild animals, in the forest, no doubt, instead of getting married and starting a family. This incurred the terrible wrath of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and fertility, who perhaps had plans for Polyphonte whom she had spurned. Aphrodite was enraged and swore revenge; and caused Polyphonte to become infatuated with a wild bear. When Artemis found Polyphonte and the bear together, it was her turn to fly into a fit of rage. Out of revulsion, Artemis turned all of the wild animals against Polyphonte and chased her from the forest. Terrified, she fled home.

Polyphonte soon gave birth to twins, two boys, who inherited some of their father's wild characteristics. They grew to be very big and strong, were insolent to gods and men, and upon meeting any strangers, they would devour them. Their cannibalism and complete lack of reverence angered Zeus, who sent his son Hermes to punish the twins. But before Hermes could sever their hands and feet, Ares intervened, and they decided to turn them into less dangerous creatures instead. The twins were transformed into a bird of ill-omen and a vulture. Their mother, Polyphonte, was turned into the Strix, a harbinger of war and strife, who cries by night and rests hanging upside down by day.

Although this account reveals that the Strix was originally based on a bat, some sources even saying the Strix produced milk. The Strix is now thought of as an owl and was passed on in folktales as such. Historically, of course, a bat was considered to be a bird, so the distinction was less clear-cut.

Ovid also described the story of Prince Procas, who at five days old was a victim of the Strix while the nurse was out of the room. When the nurse returned, the baby was drained of color and had scratches down his cheeks. The nurse ran to the nymph

Carna and begged for her help. The nymph came and reassured the parents and performed several rituals that would prevent the Strix from entering the nursery again. The young Prince thereafter regained his color.

This story has been exceptionally well preserved in folklore, even down to the ingredients used to enchant the nursery window frames, such as the entrails of a piglet and specific twigs and herbs.

Folktales favor the link to witchcraft and the vampiric nature of the Strix, and sometimes the Strix is said to be a witch who can shape-shift. These folktales are likely to have been used to explain sickly, pale children with no other identifiable cause, and it is common for babies to scratch their own faces while they are sleeping, making it look all the more sinister.

Over time, Strix has changed from a woman turned into a bat as punishment to a witch that can turn into an owl to feed on young children. What remains constant is its eerie shrieks that can be heard in the night and the association with blood and death.

Chapter 7: Impundulu

Origin: SOUTH AFRICAN FOLKLORE



Solomon had just sat down to read when he heard an urgent knock at the door. Strange, he thought; he wasn't expecting anyone. He looked through the front window on the way to the hall. A stranger in a smart gray suit was standing there. Maybe he was lost. "Hi, can I help you?" Solomon asked as he opened the door two-thirds, keeping one foot behind it since the chain was still broken.

In an odd monotone, the stranger replied, "You have annoyed my mistress."

"I'm sorry, your what now?" Solomon blurted out, utterly confused.

"My mistress, Umona. And now you must pay."

Before Solomon had time to think, the stranger had transformed into a tall gray bird and lashed a powerful red leg through the opening of the door. A sharp talon bit into Solomon's left knee and cut into his calf. The bird thrust itself against the door, but Solomon's good leg stopped it. He quickly threw his weight into the door, slamming it closed with all his might. Umona, he thought she had taken it badly when he turned her down, but he didn't realize she was a witch with a lightning bird in her service. He tried to remember if the back door was locked.

The Impundulu, or lightning bird, features in the African folklore of many different peoples, such as Zulu, Xhosa, Bhaca, and Nguni. It manifests as a bird associated with a lightning bolt, and the sound of thunder is the Impundulu flapping its wings. It is sometimes said that men will only see the lightning, but women can catch a glimpse of the bird if they are close enough to see where the lightning strikes the ground.

The Impundulu rides to earth on the lightning to lay its eggs underground wherever the lightning strikes. If the eggs are left to incubate in the earth, it will bring bad luck to the area when they subsequently hatch. For this reason, witch doctors will try to remove the eggs, but this very act could bring good or bad luck. The eggs themselves are said to have magical properties and can cause your enemies to be struck by lightning if the curse is performed correctly. If the witch doctor is quick enough, they might be able to catch the Impundulu, snatching it from the lightning.

Reverend Donald Fraser was a Scottish missionary who worked closely with local people in Malawi from 1896–1925 and wrote extensively about his experiences. One day, one of Fraser's students was struck and killed by lightning while he sat by the fire. It was not uncommon for people to be killed by lightning, and Rev. Fraser observed that local people believed lightning to be a bird. He asked the night watchman if he had ever seen the lightning bird. The nightwatchman explained that while he had never seen it himself, a girl in his village had seen one recently. The girl was working in her garden when the lightning bird splashed down into a pool of water beside her. The night watchman said he was surprised to hear the girl describe it as a large bird because they had all imagined it to be small. She said it was large and black with a long tail, like a cockerel. From the pool, the bird ran up her hoe and scratched her body with its talons, and then flew back up into the clouds. It had left curious marks on her body that the night watchman had seen, and he said they even kept one of its feathers. This account is consistent with lightning traveling through objects and leaving unusual-looking scars.

In addition to being associated with lightning, the Impundulu can also be the familiar of a witch. But in Bhaca folklore, in particular, the Impundulu has even more sinister characteristics. People believed that a witch could be anyone; you would never

know because they would use an Impundulu to do their bidding. Witches could control the Impundulu, and as the bird lives for a very long time, it would be passed down from mother to daughter. Without a mistress to control it, the Impundulu would rampage as a monster, causing chaos. The Impundulu would appear to its mistress as a handsome young man in a gray suit, ready to receive instructions. Its special talent was transforming back into a bird to kick the witch's enemies to death.

The African secretary bird is known to kick, stamp, and peck its prey to death and has the red legs, black and white plumage, long tail, and interesting head feathers often mentioned in Impundulu descriptions. However, the title lightning bird is usually given to a much smaller gray-brown bird, the hamerkop. The hamerkop has a habit of calling loudly before it rains, so people thought it could summon storms, and if you stole its eggs, you would be struck by lightning.

People believed that lightning, and therefore the lightning bird, was an evil influence that needed to be warded off. It was often thought to be controlled by witchcraft, further increasing the Impundulu's evil and malicious reputation.

Chapter 8: Huma

ORIGIN: PERSIAN FOLKLORE



The egg fell through the sky, from above the clouds, hurtling towards the earth far below. The golden shell had begun to crack in several places. The wind whistled by as a small beak protruded, pushing a piece of shell away. The small bedraggled being wriggled and squirmed until it was free, but it was still hurtling through the chill air. As it tumbled head over heels, it opened one eye and then another. The brightness of the morning lit up the patchwork of fields and dirt roads looming larger and larger. Long colorful feathers were beginning to grow from its body, and as it neared the ground, the bird thought its first thought. In fear of striking the ground, the chick let out a shrill cry. Just in time, it stretched out its wings and swooped gracefully off into the air, no longer a bedraggled chick but a magnificent Huma bird.

Huma is the bird of paradise from Persian folklore. It spends its life in constant flight, even being born in the air, and never touches the ground. It comes to earth only to eat, but as it is a compassionate creature, it does not kill other animals but scavenges carrion instead. This is consistent with many believing it to be akin to a bearded vulture, although it is often depicted as a peacock in mosaics and other decorations. Persepolis, the ancient capital of the Persian Empire, had many images and statues of Huma.

Huma has the long wings and hooked beak of a vulture and the long neck and tail of a peacock. Although it lays eggs, it is considered both male and female, the two natures residing in a single body. Huma birds lived a very long life and died in their own flames to be reborn again, inspiring the later Phoenix.

Catching a glimpse of Huma would make you happy and content for the rest of your life, and even its shadow falling on you would bestow great blessings. It was considered a sacred bird that could not survive capture, and anyone who tried to injure it would die within forty days.

It is a bird symbolizing extreme good fortune, and believing in it gave people hope and confidence. Above all, it gave people faith in the legitimacy of their rulers since it was well known that if Huma's shadow lingered over your head, or Huma alighted momentarily on you, you were destined to become a king. In fact, the feathers in the turbans of Persian rulers were said to be Huma feathers.

Within the Royal Collection Trust, in England, lies evidence that the Sultan of Mysore took this idea seriously. With the fall of Sultan Tipu, a golden Huma figurine was found suspended above his throne. The ornament is a solid gold peacock-shaped bird, around the size of a pigeon, with its wings outstretched to give the appearance of hovering. It is inlaid with an array of precious rubies, emeralds, diamonds, and pearls. Perhaps it even cast a shadow directly onto the throne.

Folklore featuring Huma usually focuses on its role legitimizing royalty or its compassionate nature:

A woodcutter was resting under a tree on his way from the forest, his bundle of firewood beside him. He hadn't the energy to carry it to the merchant just yet, but his family would not eat until he did. He would just have a short rest. As he fell asleep, Huma flew over him and was moved by the woodcutter's poverty and suffering. Huma wanted to help him and laid a golden egg on his bundle of sticks. When the woodcutter awoke, he saw the egg and imagined the food he could buy for the evening meal if he sold it. When the cunning merchant saw it, he paid the woodcutter a measly price, saying one golden egg was not that valuable, but he would like to buy the bird that laid it.

At the same time the next day, the woodcutter rested under the same tree with a bundle of sticks but only pretended to be asleep. Huma saw him still barefoot and in the same threadbare shirt and thought he must not have received the gift of the golden egg. When Huma landed on his bundle of sticks, he snatched the

bird in his hands. Huma cried out and begged for freedom; it promised to reward him if he set it free, but the woodcutter was determined to get his payment from the merchant. The bird died on the way to the shop, and the woodcutter realized he had thrown away his chance of a better life by betraying Huma.

Huma came to symbolize not only the legitimacy of rulers but also the elevation of the spirit and an enlightened mind. Just as Huma never touches the ground, some people's minds are not attached to material aspects of the mundane world; they have more heavenly concerns. The Sufi teacher Inayat Khan suggested that the word 'king' was used as a synonym for 'most high,' so the blessing of Huma is not limited to royalty.

In the modern-day world, Huma forms the logo for Iranian Airlines, just as Garuda forms the logo for Indonesian Airlines. It also features in the national emblem of Uzbekistan, representing compassion and love of freedom.

Chapter 9: Simurgh

Origin: PERSIAN FOLKLORE



It had been a long journey in an underground world trying to recover a stolen pomegranate with the power to grant longevity. Melik couldn't believe his brothers had pulled the rope away and left him down the well—he wouldn't have done that to them. Yes, the girl he rescued from the ogre was beautiful, but still, they were his brothers, that should stand for something. He should have listened to her and gone up the rope first, but he hadn't liked the idea of her waiting down here alone.

He had managed to kill the ogre that lived beneath the well and take back the pomegranate it had stolen. Maybe if he had killed the ogre in its sleep, instead of waking it up for a fair fight, he wouldn't be so exhausted now, but it didn't seem right at the time. Now he was desperately lost in the network of caves with no hope of ever seeing the surface again. Not for the first time, Melik wished he had kept the pomegranate instead of sending it up to the surface with the girl.

As Melik collapsed from exhaustion and desperation, he heard the chirp of baby birds nearby. In the strange gloom, he saw a serpent approaching the nest with a vicious glint in its eye. With the last of his strength, Melik drew an arrow and shot the serpent, severing it in two. When the mother bird returned, she saw what he had done and draped her great wings over him until he recovered his strength. Luckily for Melik, he had earned favor with the only healing bird who had the power to travel between worlds; the Simurgh.

Simurgh is a benevolent bird hybrid reminiscent of a copper-colored peacock with flowing plumage and the head of a dog. Its feet are that of a lion though it only has three claws on each foot. Simurgh is big enough to carry an elephant with ease and strong enough to accommodate passengers. It knows the secrets of fate and can travel to the faraway land of light and the land of darkness in the netherworld. With sharp claws and serrated

teeth, Simurgh has the anatomy of a predator but is filled with love for all living creatures.

The earliest accounts of Simurgh describe it as a male bird, often used in Sufi poetry as a symbol of god. In later versions, Simurgh was modeled on a bat, with teeth and the ability to produce milk, thus becoming female. Like Ancient Greece, a bat was thought of as a type of bird in those days. To reconcile the two accounts, Simurgh was given a dog's head and is often called the dog-bird, just as bats once were in Persia.

Although many stories tell of Simurgh nesting in a cave, Simurgh resides in the tree of life, which contains the seeds for all plant life on earth. As Simurgh leaves its perch on the tree, it shakes some seeds free to be dispersed across the land. In Persia, plants were valued for their medicinal properties, so Simurgh is strongly associated with knowledge of healing. In many traditional tales, Simurgh uses this knowledge to heal people:

When Zal was only a baby, he was abandoned on a mountainside for being albino. His father was terrified of his pale skin and yellow-white hair and was certain this child was actually a demon. Simurgh was flying to her nest up the mountain to feed her young when she saw the baby and took pity on it. She carried it to her nest and raised it with her two offspring as if it were her own child.

When Zal was grown, his father had a dream about him, and full of remorse, he came in search of his son. Simurgh let Zal go with his father but gave him three feathers as a symbol of fortune and protection. If a feather was put into the fire, it would call Simurgh to Zal's side.

Zal used the first feather when his wife was dying during childbirth. Simurgh appeared and explained how to perform a cesarean section. Simurgh applied healing herbs and saved the

life of Zal's wife and child. The child was Zal's son, Rostam, who became one of the greatest heroes in Persian folklore.

The second and last time Zal used a feather to summon Simurgh was when Rostam and his famous stallion, Rakhsh, were gravely wounded with arrows. Again, Simurgh used her knowledge of healing and medicinal herbs to remove the arrows and heal their wounds.

In other folktales, Simurgh uses her ability to fly between worlds to take people to the land of light and from the netherworld of darkness. In ancient Persia, both dogs and peacocks were believed to have the abilities of a psychopomp, taking souls between worlds, which helps to explain Simurgh's later hybrid appearance. Of further note regarding Simurgh's hybrid nature is that fruit bats in Iran live in both trees and caves and are linked to seed dispersal when they eat fruit and cast the seeds far and wide.

Simurgh is thought to be an earlier version of Huma in Persian folklore. Like Huma, Simurgh is compassionate and extremely long-lived, renewing itself in flames as it reaches what would otherwise be the end of its life. With its extensive knowledge of the curative powers of plants, Simurgh symbolizes medicine and healing.

Section Three | Cryptic Canines

Chapter 10: Vrykolakas

Origin: GREEK FOLKLORE



The Mother Prioress knew she had been awoken by a noise, but she could not put her finger on what it had been. She warily opened her eyes. The grey light of morning was beginning to creep through the shutters. Her heart was racing, and she could not yet bring herself to move. Without needing to turn her head, she looked for her rosary beads on the bedside table, but they were not there. She remembered the noise that had woken her then: her beads clattering to the stone floor. She began to pray, and as she did so, a hideous cackle echoed throughout the room. Suddenly, her bedsheets were flung through the air, and she saw a hairy back skitter through the door, the sinister laughter going with it. She did not scream, but her holy words became a shout.

Holding her cross out in front of her and continuing to pray loudly, she ventured through the door. Everything was upended, and holy wine was spilled all over the floor. She followed the sound of running water; for some reason, her shoes were in the cistern. So the rumors were true. She knew who, or rather what, it was; the villagers had been complaining about the same sort of events. She knew a trip to the moneylender's widow was in order. She would have to tell her that when her good-for-nothing-husband died owing everybody money, he became a Vrykolakas. She was sure the Vrykolakas would not stop terrorizing people until his widow had paid his debts with the money he had put away. She would set off as soon as her shoes were dry.

A Vrykolakas is an undead being of Greek origin with Slavic influences and sometimes characteristics of a werewolf. The Vrykolakas rises from its grave every night, except Saturdays, and haunts its old community. Folklore accounts of their activities range from roaming around, poltergeist-like troublemaking, to suffocating people in their sleep and eating their flesh.

The name has its roots in Slavic words, such as *varkolak*, meaning 'wolf hair.' Although the etymology is Slavic, brought to Greece via immigration, the concept of the undead has the

longest history in Greece, and belief in Vrykolakes was by far the most widespread and pervasive there.

Before the concept of returning from the dead was recorded in Slavic folklore, it was well established in Greek literature. The oldest surviving record of a return from the dead is the story of the unmarried young woman Philinnion from the 2nd Century AD:

The servant ran from the guest bedroom screaming and quickly went to fetch the parents of the household. Their daughter Philinnion had been dead for several months, but the servant explained that she had just seen her sitting on the bed with their visitor, Makhates. By the time they reached the guest bedroom, all that was visible was a pile of women's clothes, like Philinnion used to wear, a piece of gold jewelry on the table, and entwined bodies under the sheets. The prying party resolved to ask Makhates about it in the morning.

But when morning came, the girl was gone. When Philinnion's mother asked Makhates who had visited him in the night, he said her name was Philinnion and showed her the clothes and jewelry she had left behind. Philinnion's mother recognized them and began to wail and grasp at her hair in grief and confusion. When Philinnion visited the next night, Makhates could not believe that she was undead and remained captivated by her desire for him.

The parents burst in and broke down in tears to see their daughter seemingly alive. However, Philinnion reproached them for interfering with the will of the underworld and, saying they must now grieve again, fell down dead a second time. When Philinnion's tomb was checked, it was empty apart from trinkets given by Makhates during the nightly visitations. Philinnion's body was cremated, and the despondent Makhates killed himself, perhaps hoping to join Philinnion in the underworld.

In remote areas of Greece, people continued to believe in Vrykolakes. They were believed to eat the flesh of the living or

otherwise feed off their vital life force. Vrykolakes are said to look like a person or a dog but could take the shape of anything they wished, so accounts rarely agree.

A Vrykolakas would be created when a werewolf was improperly killed, or a person ate contaminated meat that had been killed by a wolf or werewolf. This would lead to the Vrykolakas having hairy palms, enlarged canine teeth, and glowing eyes.

People could also turn into Vrykolakes after death if they had lived a sinful life or were buried in unconsecrated ground. In Ancient Greece, archeological evidence shows bodies weighted down with heavy rocks and millstones to anchor them into their graves and prevent them from rising from the dead to torment the living.

During the famine in Greece associated with World War II, many people had to be buried in unconsecrated ground as the graveyards overflowed. The belief that the dead would return as Vrykolakes was so strong that many people resorted to decapitating the corpses of their own family members before burial to prevent them from rising from the grave.

The name Vrykolakas implies an early type of werewolf and vampire mix—it is undead and torments the living. They represent a disturbance in the natural order where the dead should remain dead, and nothing good can come from a visit from a Vrykolakas.

Chapter 11: Adlet

Origin: INUIT FOLKLORE



The two Tornits sat by the glowing fire, whispering. Stars winked down at them from the clear night sky.

"Why are we afraid of these half-men when they are so much smaller than us?" said the bulky giant.

"Don't be foolish, you saw how they ripped one of their own kind to pieces and ate him. Besides, we are outnumbered. We should escape while they are asleep with full stomachs," the astute one replied.

"You are probably right. But they are fast runners, what if they catch up with our sled?"

"With only two legs, they are not as fast as a sled. Besides, their dogs are not faster than our dogs. But we must make sure they cannot follow us."

"What do you suggest, brother?"

"You harness our dogs, I will cut their sled lashings."

And with that, the two Tornits quietly crept into action. Just as they were about to set off, one of their dogs barked in excitement, and the half-men woke up. With their tails whipping behind them, they jumped onto their sleds to pursue the Tornits. But while their dogs scattered across the snow, the Adlet were left standing on abandoned sleds, and the two Tornits escaped into the night.

In ancient Inuit culture, people believed in several different tribes of beings such as the Tornits (giants), Inugandligat (dwarves), and Adlet. The Adlet, or Erqigdlet as they were also known, were a race of dog-men with a human upper body and the two legs and tail of a dog or wolf. Adlets were said to be taller than Inuits but not nearly as tall as the Tornits. Adlets were very swift runners and possessed an aggressive disposition. In some stories, the Adlet are cannibalistic, eating their own kind in addition to being savage and murderous towards other tribes and races.

A confrontation with the Adlet always resulted in a fierce battle, but despite their apparent physical superiority, the Inuit always overcame them. These stories highlight desirable qualities valued in Inuit society, such as physical strength, outsmarting opponents, and teamwork.

The following is a widespread tale of great antiquity with variations found throughout Greenland, Labrador, and Hudson Bay. It is sometimes known as '*The Girl and the Dogs*':

Niviarsiang lived with her father, but she refused to marry. Until one day, she married a dog, Ijirqang. Ijirqang was a very unusual dog who was spotted and had an enthralling gaze. Soon, Niviarsiang and Ijirqang had ten children; five were dog pups, and five were Adlet pups with the top half of a human and the lower half of a dog.

Ijirqang did not hunt, so it fell to Niviarsiang's father, Savirqong, to provide meat for the loud and clamorous family. One day, Savirqong had had enough, and he rowed them all out to a barren island and left them there. He promised he would still hunt for them, and Ijirqang, the unusual dog, could swim across to collect the meat. Each time, Ijirqang would swim back with sealskin sacks filled with meat draped across his body. But Ijirqang came every day wanting more and more meat, for the

children had voracious appetites, and his father-in-law eventually tired of this.

One day, instead of meat, Savirqong filled the sealskin sacks with rocks, and Ijirqang drowned before he could reach the island. When Ijirqang's wife, Niviarsiang, found out what had happened, she sought revenge against her father. She sent her ten children to attack him, but they were unsuccessful and returned to the island afraid.

Their mother, Niviarsiang, decided they must be sent away for their own safety. She took off the sole of her shoe and set it upon the water. As she did so, it grew into a boat large enough for five passengers. Niviarsiang sent her five dog pups away in the boat, and she told her five Adlet to flee inland where their grandfather could not find them. Now alone on the barren island, Niviarsiang perished from hunger.

Often a more recent version of this story is presented as an origin story for different peoples because the word *adlet* or *erqigdlet* was used by some Inuit communities to describe inland tribes of Native Americans. Additionally, the word for Europeans (*qavdlunait*) was similar to the term for the dog children (*qeydlunait*). However, this must be a later adaptation because versions of this story predate Inuit encounters with Europeans. It is more likely that an existing tale was adapted to explain the existence of the European visitors.

The name of the unusual dog, Ijirqang, means 'the powerful eye,' which explains how he conquered Niviarsiang with a glance when she had refused all other suitors. Some accounts consider Ijirqang to be the personification of the wolf, and *qavdlunait* can be taken to mean wolf. This would make the Adlet children half-wolf instead of half-dog, which seems a more suitable explanation for their savage reputation.

If the Adlet had canine upper bodies and human legs, they would readily symbolize a fierce predator, but they do not. The Adlet have a human upper body and canine lower body, so instead, they represent a beastly man. Their very nature highlights what makes us human as it strongly points to the Inuit cultural values of working together, being innovative and resourceful, and looking out for each other—and that is why the Inuit always beat the Adlet.

Chapter 12: Kishi

Origin: SOUTH AFRICAN Mythology



Adelina looked at the gruesome animated skull in front of her and could not believe that it had just asked her to marry it. Of course, she had refused, and now she knocked it away disdainfully. The skull did not fall but floated over to Adelina's sister Sophronia. It offered Sophronia the same proposal, which she graciously accepted, much to Adelina's disgust. But the skull revealed its true form as the god of the sea and took Adelina's sister to rule in great comfort under the waves.

Adelina was far more intrigued by the handsome stranger who next approached her and eagerly accepted his proposal of marriage. The young man beckoned her down a mysterious path, deep into the forest, until finally, they reached an empty hut. As soon as they entered the hut, the handsome stranger revealed his true form, but he was no god. He had two heads, both with dark, hateful eyes and wide sneering jaws, filled with massive sharp teeth, built for crushing bones. Sick to her stomach and mortally afraid, Adelina realized she had pledged herself to a Kishi, and he would never let her leave.

Kishi are, at their core, shapeshifters. In the oldest translations of Angolan stories, the Kishi are described as multi-headed ogres but often more accurately described as spirits or demons. In Bantu mythology, which encompasses the Kimbundu of Angola that the Kishi are usually attributed to, man-eating monsters are a common theme, and the Kishi certainly fall under this category.

There were once three young women on the way to visit a tribe of Kishi, who lived in the forest and had recently befriended the girls. One of the girls' younger sisters was determined to tag along and followed the older girls even after they sent her away. The girls did not know that on this visit, the Kishi were planning to eat them during the night.

After sharing the evening meal, the girls went to sleep in their hut, but the little sister stayed awake, feeling uneasy. She was the only one who heard the Kishi at the door when they asked, *'are you all asleep?'*

The younger sister felt that they would all be doomed if she fell asleep, so she sang a response. She sang that they were all in bed but not asleep because they were cold, hungry, thirsty, and mosquitoes were keeping them awake. The Kishi conferred and decided to give more food so the girls would fall asleep and they could eat them. The younger sister accepted the mash they offered and set it aside inside the hut. When the Kishi were gone, she woke the older girls, but they did not believe her. After a while, the Kishi again asked if they were asleep, and again the little sister sang her song. So the Kishi brought bottle gourds of beer to send them to sleep and blankets to keep the mosquitoes off them. Again, the little sister accepted what the Kishi offered and set them aside. The other girls heard the Kishi whispering and also became uneasy.

While the Kishi were not looking, the girls sneaked out of the hut and hid up a tall tree, so the next time the Kishi asked if they were all asleep, they got no response. The Kishi set fire to the hut, thinking to cook the sleeping girls, but when they looked for the meat in the ashes, they did not find any and started to search the surroundings. Unbeknown to them, a passing eagle had taken the girls home one by one from the top of the tree. The girls' families had no money to repay the eagle, so they said he could help himself to their hens whenever he wanted. So when an eagle takes hens, it is not stealing but a payment for rescuing our ancestors from the Kishi.

In Bantu belief, a person could be born with an evil spirit inside them, leading them to be driven by jealousy and become addicted to a life of crime and violence, like a predatory animal. Over time, the person may learn to change into such an animal

and become a Kishi. Although usually able to retake their human form, over time, the Kishi may become permanently transformed into a bloodthirsty animal.

In Bantu mythology and fables, the hyena is often the main adversary because they are considered devious and not to be trusted. Hyenas are also a very fitting animal for the Kishi as they both represent treachery and vulgarity. This concept has been popularized by the novelist Antoine Bandele, giving the Kishi two faces, a ferocious hyena face on the back of a handsome man's head, a truly terrifying prospect.

To trap a Kishi, only the most skilled master of magic can extricate it from its dwelling and confine it to a receptacle such as a horn or leather bag. These trapped Kishi can be worn as amulets to ward off enemies and protect the body from disease. However, the most powerful Kishi can only be enticed if you murder a family member and offer their flesh; thus, the Kishi can tempt you down the path of becoming a monster yourself.

An Angolan proverb perhaps best sums up the Kishi: appearances are deceitful.

Chapter 13: Psoglav

Origin: SLAVIC Mythology



The smell of death was unmistakable, like an undiscovered sheep that had laid down for the last time several days ago. Bojan sat with his back pressed against the wall of the graveyard, metal railings on either side of the brick pillar he was currently behind. His heart was pounding heavily in his chest, and his hands were firmly clamped over his mouth. He was sure he was breathing too loud. Although it was broad daylight, the streets were deserted, and something sinister was going on. There were no birds singing, no children playing. He searched desperately for a better place to hide. Where was everyone? Bojan's eyes locked onto the thick hedge lining the street on the opposite side of the road, but what if he didn't make it in time?

A moment ago, Bojan had been out for some fresh air, and now he was cowering behind the wall, ever since he saw the creature. It had towered over Mrs. Ryba's freshly filled grave, with its back to him; crumbling earth strewn around its hooves. It had been holding something like a necklace up as if inspecting or admiring it with its grotesque hairy head. Its eyes, he hadn't seen its eyes. Its jaws were what had troubled Bojan the most; opened in a sneer, filled with pointed teeth and dripping with... he couldn't bring himself to think about it; he had known Mrs. Ryba his whole life. Revolted, Bojan heard tearing and crunching inside the graveyard, and he decided he would have to make a run for it. Maybe he could scramble across the road while the monster was eating and get behind the bushes without it seeing him before he too was eaten by a Psoglav. Bojan had an unwelcome thought just as he was about to make his move: what if there are more than one?

Psoglavs were described as having a dog's head on a human body, and in Serbian Cyrillic, *psoglav* means 'dog head.' The head of a Psoglav has only one eye, set in the center of its forehead, like a Cyclops. Psoglavs have iron teeth and claws on their human-shaped hands and two long legs ending in horse's hooves. They are closely related to giants, and like them, as well as being much taller than humans, they also prefer to live in caves or other dark places. Their dwellings were said to permit

no sunlight but to contain many gemstones, perhaps taken from their victims.

Although they are not harmed by sunlight, Psoglavs prefer to hunt at night in packs. They prey upon people, alive or dead, and even dig out corpses from their graves, ransacking whole villages and graveyards to feast on flesh.

A single Psoglav sounds deadly enough, but one epic Russian poem mentions a whole army of Psoglavs:

The ruling tsarina of Moscow was impatient to get the priceless relics that she so desired: St. John's banner, clothing of an ancient patriarch, and gold dust from the Serbian city of Smederevo. She asked a visiting Sultan to procure them for her, but he refused as he was unwilling to steal. Before the tsarina even began to search for a less scrupulous individual, General Božo, who volunteered his services on the condition that he could have an army of one hundred thousand Psoglavs. Thinking only of the precious relics, the tsarina agreed. When night fell, General Božo sent forth his army of Psoglavs. They tore across the land like wildfire, and members of the invading Ottoman Army ran for their lives, with the army of young Psoglavs at their heels.

In Eastern Christian Orthodoxy, there were images of Saint Christopher with the head of a dog, and he was often called *Psoglavi Svetac*, 'the dog-headed Saint.' In the old tradition, it was the Slavic consensus that Saint Christopher was originally a Psoglav called Reprebus, meaning 'scoundrel' or 'reprobate.' Under the rule of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, the Roman Army fought a pack of Psoglavs and managed to capture one, Reprebus. Reprebus was described as a giant with the head of a dog. He was forced to join the Romans and was baptized into Christianity, and later martyred, becoming a Saint.

This version of Saint Christopher's life has been discouraged by the Church, and Moscow prohibited images of Saint Christopher with the head of a dog in the 18th century. It has also been suggested that the depiction of Saint Christopher as dog-headed may have come from a misunderstanding, or likely misreading, of the Latin word *Cananeus* (the name of an ancient civilization) because it is similar to the Latin word *caninus* meaning 'canine.'

Slavic iconography seemed to use dog-headed men to represent what they considered to be barbaric outsiders from the edge of civilization. The Slavic nations were subject to foreign invasions, and from their perspective, members of the Ottoman Empire probably did seem to invade from the edge of the world. Attributing animal characteristics to people perceived to be different is a tactic used to dehumanize the enemy and has persisted throughout history.

With palpable predatory similarities to the wolf, such as hunting in packs and a rapacious appetite for flesh, Psoglav also represent the absence of honor and loyalty.

Chapter 14: Ahuizotl

Origin: AZTEC MYTHOLOGY



The village chieftains looked at the old woman with a mixture of condescension and mild amusement. Instead of growing wise with age, they were sure that she had grown silly. She stood in front of them, dripping water all over the floor, her soaked clothes clinging to her hunched frame, and noticeably out of breath from rushing to their presence. In her arms, she clasped a large jug for carrying water; it was a wonder she could still lift it. Bizarrely it was covered with her petticoat, which she was gripping tightly over the top as if trying to contain jumping frogs. Fancy appearing in front of the chieftains dripping wet and with no underskirt on.

In response to the chieftains' gestures to proceed, the woman put the jug down on the floor. Glancing anxiously up at them, she retrieved her petticoat and slowly shuffled backward. With a slop of water, out of the jug sprang a creature like a small dog, slick jet black, soaking wet, and its head lowered in a growl. The old woman had been sure the chieftains were going to be pleased with her find, but as they gasped and pointed, clearly they were not. They had seen its small pointy ears and its paws that were like children's hands. It shook itself, spraying water onto everyone, and its hair stood up on end. Now the chieftains were shouting at her and trying to get out of the room. With surprising quickness, the old lady sprang on the wet creature, covering it with her petticoat and stuffing it back into her water jug. As she did so, the creature's long tail flicked back out, grasping the air fruitlessly with the hand on the end of its tail. Whatever the chieftains were expecting the old lady to show them, they weren't expecting an Ahuizotl.

The detailed knowledge about the appearance and behavior of the Ahuizotl is primarily thanks to one man, Bernardino de Sahagún, the Spanish Friar. Over the fifty years he lived among the Aztecs, he learned the Nahuatl language, interviewed many locals about their beliefs, culture, and history, and extensively wrote about his careful observations. Nestled in Book XI of his famous Florentine Codex, often described as one of the best accounts of a non-Western culture ever written, is a detailed

chapter on the Ahuizotl, complete with exquisite illustrations by indigenous artists.

The Ahuizotl is a small dog-type creature that inhabits pools and rivers, residing in an underwater cave. When wet, its black coat is smooth, shiny, and slippery. Out of the water, its hair becomes spiky, hence its name meaning 'spiky water dweller.' Instead of paws, the Ahuizotl has small human-like hands, comparable to a monkey or raccoon, with five fingers and opposable thumbs. It also has a hand on the end of its long prehensile tail, which it uses to drag victims underwater to drown them.

When a victim was dragged underwater, from the water's edge or a boat, the water churned, and white foam lapped the shore. A few days later, the body would float to the surface minus eyes, teeth, and fingernails that the Ahuizotl was said to have taken from the otherwise uninjured body. Due to its aggressive nature, the Aztec king of the same name took the Ahuizotl as his mascot.

Only an Aztec priest was deemed worthy to touch the body of Ahuizotl's victims because the creature was seen to be doing the bidding of the gods. If the victim had been a good person, people would say that the rain-gods, the Tlalocs, had wanted their company in the terrestrial paradise. If they did not have such a good reputation, people would say that they must have been hoarding precious stones that, representing water, they should have offered to the rain-gods.

If the Ahuizotl had not had any victims for a long time, it used several methods to entice people to the water. Thrashing near its lair would make the fish and frogs come to the surface, tempting the fishermen to come close. It could also cry like a baby, tricking people into coming in search of the lost child.

In Aztec culture, if you heard a strange creature in the night, such as the cry of the Ahuizotl, you should visit the soothsayer as soon as possible. They would encourage people to take heart and face the hardships foretold by such bad omens with courage. Paper, white incense, and gum would be brought, and an offering made to the god of fire, in addition to doing penance.

The Ahuizotl offered an explanation for drowning, and family members took solace from the belief that, flawless reputation or not, the souls of their relatives were now in paradise.

Although Bernardino de Sahagún is often quoted as saying his work was to enable Aztec beliefs to be understood and thereby eliminated, he was under pressure from suspicious Spanish authorities to justify his work. The same Spanish authorities later confiscated his life's work and prohibited him from continuing, although he discretely did despite the ban. While people in Spain and England doubted whether the Aztecs had souls or were even human, Bernardino de Sahagún was conversing with them in their own language and trying to understand their worldview, including their mythical creatures.

Thanks to one man's appreciation of humanity, in all of its different forms, we know that the Ahuizotl was feared and respected as a friend of the rain-gods, doing their bidding to bring people to paradise.

Section Four | The Eternal Hiss

Chapter 15: Níðhöggr

Origin: NORSE Mythology



The ash leaves had recently fallen, creating a crunchy carpet on the ground below. Rays of autumn sunlight made their way through the many branches, and brown ash keys sporadically spiraled down to meet the leaves. A red squirrel nimbly descended the trunk, its claws effortlessly gripping the deep fissures of the aged bark.

Things had grown too quiet recently, and the squirrel had decided it was time to stir up some trouble. It had first scampered to the very top of the great ash tree, along the branches extending into the heavens, to see what the eagle had to say. It had only taken a few embellishments from the squirrel to get the conversation going in the desired direction. With glee, it could still hear the outbursts of the enraged eagle it had left behind on the topmost branches. On the long way down, the squirrel pondered how to maximize the effect of the eagle's insults for his next listener.

At the bottom of the tree, the squirrel leaped through a hole and ran along the familiar roots at the roof of the dark and dingy cavern until he found the creature he sought. A long, grimy body half slithered, half crawled over the remnants of life that littered the cave. Two beady, glinting eyes followed the squirrel's approach. The squirrel ran up to the serpent and chattered its hateful messages. The serpent listened intently, becoming very still, and its expression growing unmistakably darker. Upon hearing the eagle's words, Níðhöggr was so incensed it clamped its jaws onto the roots of the ancient ash so violently that the vast tree shook. The squirrel quivered with delight as the nine worlds trembled.

Sometimes called a dragon or worm, Níðhöggr (anglicized to Nidhogg) is the serpent that lives among the roots of the Yggdrasil, the World Tree. Meaning 'Malice Striker' in Old Norse, Níðhöggr gnaws at the roots of the sacred Yggdrasil. Additionally, in Viking society, the word *níð* was an insult meaning 'dishonorable villain', which is fitting for Níðhöggr's actions.

In a 17th century manuscript in the care of the Árni Magnússon Institute in Iceland, there is a detailed illustration of the Yggdrasil depicting its principal inhabitants. At the top of the tree sits an eagle; among the branches, four stags and a horned squirrel, and shown among the roots is Níðhöggr. The serpent is depicted with a long wingless body in mottled greens and browns, with two short forelegs. Spikes run down the length of its neck, and what can be interpreted as two horns protrude from its head. With probably jagged teeth, Níðhöggr is shown biting the roots of the tree. Behind Níðhöggr skulk some of its serpentine brethren.

In the Poetic and Prose Eddas, the Yggdrasil supports the nine worlds, and it has three principal roots that reach out into different realms: one to the well of the Aesir at the home of the gods, and the second to the well of wisdom in the land of the frost giants. The final root reaches into the spring of all rivers in the underworld, where Níðhöggr lurks, in the cold and gloomy home of mist.

In one of the Poetic Eddas, the god Odin describes cosmological law:

Listen and I will tell you. The roots of the Yggdrasil travel in three directions, one to the underworld, one to the frost giants, and one to the learned men. Ratatoskr, the squirrel, scurries up and down the sacred ash tree, carrying words from the eagle above to Níðhöggr below. Among the branches, four stags lift their necks to nibble the shoots on the highest boughs. More serpents than any fool can imagine hide beneath the tree, forever gnawing away at it. The noble Yggdrasil endures more suffering than men can know. The stags bite it from above, rot sets in from the sides, and the Níðhöggr gnaws it from below.

In a different poem, it is said that Níðhöggr also torments the bodies of the dead, tearing at their corpses. The spring where Níðhöggr lives is compared to the venomous hall of torture in the

underworld reserved for murderers, adulterers, and oath-breakers. Because the woven mass of snakes that form the hall of torture spit venom onto the dead, it could be that Níðhöggr is venomous too, exacerbating the damage it does to the roots of the Yggdrasil. Because these roots support the nine worlds, the damage Níðhöggr does to the Yggdrasil is significant and poses a threat to all life.

Níðhöggr lives within the underworld so is associated with Hel, the being of life and death who rules there. Hel lords over those who have not died in battle, but had a death lacking honor, such as dying from sickness or old age, as per the Vikings. Accordingly, Níðhöggr represents suffering and decay. Often unseen but nevertheless ever-present, Níðhöggr, like the passing of time towards old age and death, is unavoidable.

Níðhöggr symbolizes the suffering that is an inevitable part of life, and it is up to gods and mortals to achieve balance, like Yggdrasil the World Tree, by responding with nobility and grace.

Chapter 16: Ajatar

Origin: FINNISH Mythology



White lichen and hairy moss clung to the north side of the cup-stone. As the hunter sang his offering song, he put a silver coin into one of the shallow holes in the rock, and into another, he placed sweet rye cakes. He was praying for bounteous hunting to feed and clothe his family. With the last note of his song, he surreptitiously glanced up at the beings gathered there. They were appeased by his efforts, and a daughter of the Northland stepped forward. The hunter kept his eyes fixed on the ground.

From her sleeve, the daughter of the Northland pulled a red thread and twisted it against her cheek. She threw one end across the river, where it disappeared into a drift of snow. As she set the other end down at her feet, the thread transformed into a narrow redwood bridge. Across it would walk, bear, moose, deer, fox, and hare so the hunter would be able to provide meat and fur for his village. He crossed the bridge and set off for home feeling exceptionally pleased.

But after the animals had crossed, the redwood bridge still stood. And when night fell upon the Northland, across the bridge walked Bitter Wind, Sharp Frost, Fire, Sudden Snowfall, Pleurisy, Atrophy, Cancer, and Gout. Lastly, Worm slithered across the bridge. All were the children of Ajatar and would bring untold suffering to the mortal realm.

Ajatar's homeland is the otherworldly Northland, or Pohjola, a bleak, dark, foreboding place in the far north. It is ceaselessly cold but associated with wild animals because the further northwards hunters went away from human habitation, the more likely they were to have a successful hunt.

Inhabitants of the Northland were ancient pagan gods and their children, who mortals appealed to for help. Despite their capacity for menace, they were mighty and could be placated by

suitable offerings. There are several stories of assistance and healing coming out of the Northland, such as a boy bringing special ice to heal burns. But evils also emerged from there, such as sickness and disease. In traditional Finnish belief, illness took the form of unseen characters with human propensities that could be expelled or even sent to others via magic.

The modern conception of Ajatar is an evil female spirit that lurks in the forest and spreads disease. Sometimes she is depicted with the lower body of a snake, and sometimes she is also young and beautiful like the half-serpent Echidna from Greek mythology, also a mother of monsters. But Ajatar wandering the mortal realm is not where her story began:

Deep in the Northland, on the Hill of Pain, sat three sisters called the Pain Maidens. They were the daughters of Tuoni, the god of death. Together they collected all of the pain from the mortal realm, for it had escaped one day when their grandmother accidentally spilled some. The sisters stoked the fire, sifted through the torments of mortals, and boiled the world's pain in a blackened kettle. When it was ready, the pain was poured into stones and sealed there because the stones didn't bemoan their suffering.

But time wore on, and one of the Pain Maidens lamented the suffering she experienced from endlessly taking people's pain away. By now, she was past her youth and bitter. She left her sisters and went out into the world. This mistress of the Northland, daughter of Tuoni, became pregnant to the east wind. She returned to the Northland to give birth to her evil brood of diseases in the bathhouse.

This version of Ajatar can be found mentioned several times within an extensive collection of Finnish magic songs collected and analyzed by John Abercromby. Multiple entries refer to Ajatar as a huge Pain Maiden with a long plait to her ankles and call her Tuoni's daughter. Some entries tell she is the mother of

diseases, the origin of cancer, and tends the fires to boil pain. One song calls her Kipu-tyttö, one of the daughters of Tuoni to be found on the Hill of Pain. This collection of songs is gathered from across Finland, and many different versions were translated and recorded with no attempt to change them to make them conform with each other.

Based on the same traditional magic songs and beliefs is *The Kalevala*, an epic poem and the most well-known work of Finnish folklore. But to make it a coherent whole, some characters have been merged or split. In *The Kalevala*, the mother of diseases is named Loviatar, and the author adds that she grew old, ugly, and blind and was black in heart, soul, and appearance, making her the worst of Tuoni's daughters.

In the traditional magic songs, Ajatar is appealed to for easing pain. There are also songs about the origin of snakes, charming snakes, and snakebites, but Ajatar is not associated with them. Although Ajatar gives birth to a snake, the origin of snakes is attributed to Hiisi (in later works called Ajatar's grandfather). Thus, Ajatar's serpent body seems to be a recent addition in novels inspired by *The Kalevala* and Greek mythology.

As many characters are often split or combined in Finnish mythology, it appears that Ajatar started off as one of the Pain Maidens. She was the daughter of a god and initially toiled with her sisters to ease the pain of mortals. Inspiring many modern works, Ajatar has taken the form of a female spirit often presented as a serpent hybrid, and she continues to symbolize suffering and disease.

Chapter 17: Zilant

Origin: Tatar Legend



Gol was no longer sure that trespassing in the royal meadow had been a good idea. As he stood there, in his dirty peasant garb, he looked in vain for his old mare, who had wandered off into the lush grass. In a moment of rash bravery, he had ordered his two companions to stay in the tent, and he didn't trust his voice to ask them to come and stand with him now. They had all received a message from a knight that Her Royal Highness was sending a most indomitable guardian against them. Gol had killed the knight, riotously flailing his ax around, but Gol's bravado had leaked away since, as if it had seeped through the soles of his tattered shoes and into the soft earth.

The sound of clanking chains among the vast oak trees near the top of the hill brought him sharply from his thoughts, and a dark shape rose into the air. It was the color of gunmetal with angular wings and a long twisting tail. The guardian opened its formidable maw and roared as it flew towards Gol like an arrow. Gol drew himself up bravely and was ready to face his death with courage. But the guardian was a suspicious creature, and pulled up short upon seeing Gol's ragged appearance, convinced there must be trickery at play. Gol took his chance, and a lucky blow to the head knocked the beast out. It collapsed heavily onto the grass, and Gol struck it again and again, wild with fear that it would wake up to finish him off. He looked at its broken scaly body, the once-mighty wings now crumpled like paper. No one would doubt Gol the peasant had killed a knight now that he had slain Zilant.

In the heart of the city of Kazan, in western Russia, a monument of Zilant takes center stage near the Kremlin walls. Zilant is a gray-black scaly dragon with sharp teeth and a red forked tongue. It has large leathery wings and a long serpentine tail ending in a spike or arrow. At the end of its two legs are golden rooster-like clawed feet. This famous dragon is a familiar image in the city because it forms the city's flag and coat of arms and has a long and well-documented history in heraldry, where it is often given a golden crown.

Kazan boasts a vibrant combination of Russian and Tatar culture, and Tatars are the largest Turkic-speaking ethnic group in Russia. The Russian word for Zilant comes from the Tatar word meaning 'snake,' whereas the Tartars call Zilant 'dragon' or 'snake-dragon.' As well as the name, the folklore and legends surrounding Zilant also stem from Tatar stories. It was a common Tatar belief that any snake that lived for one hundred years would grow wings and transform into a dragon which is reflected in the stories:

In days gone by, there was once a beekeeper that lived on Zilantaw Hill near the city of Kazan. The city itself was not where it is now but further away from the river. The beekeeper had a daughter, and she liked to accompany him when he smoked his hives and collected the honey on Zilantaw Hill.

When the daughter of the beekeeper married, she moved to another part of the city. Now she had to carry water a long way from the river, and she was not impressed with the city's layout that caused her so much extra daily work.

Feeling irked, she complained to Kazan Khan, the ruler, that the city would be better closer to the river near Zilantaw Hill. But the Khan pointed out that there were too many snakes there. The beekeeper's daughter suggested they burn the snakes while they were hiding under piles of sticks and then move the city. The Khan agreed, and soon his army thought they had successfully killed all of the snakes. However, one remained. It was the king of the snakes, the grand, winged Zilant. The dragon flew away across the lake but returned periodically to terrorize the city of Kazan.

Some stories tell of brave heroes defeating Zilant, but others are certain that Zilant still lives. One version suggests that Zilant descended into the lake to escape his pursuers and may still hide in the depths. In other tales, Zilant no longer attacks the city

because he was persuaded with gold, and he still guards the Khan's treasure to this day in secret caves.

The city of Kazan was historically a boundary fortress, and there were many stories of flying monsters in the surrounding areas. This reflects the historical turbulence of these boundary regions due to conflict between Islam and paganism. The dragon Zilant used to represent power and destruction and was usually an opposing force in building the city of Kazan. However, with great courage and ingenuity, he was overcome, or at least persuaded to change sides, representing the resilience of the people when united towards a common goal.

In modern times, Zilant holding a Tatarstan tulip forms the heart of the logo for the Special Olympics World Winter Games 2022, emblematic of friendship, hospitality, and joy. From a fierce adversary to a popular emblem, Zilant has come to be regarded with fondness and represents guardianship and hospitality.

Chapter 18: Grootslang

Origin: SOUTH AFRICAN Mythology



I had not been deterred by the worried faces of my team. No one else had attempted this before, but I was sure there was treasure down there. I was determined to go home mightily rich or die trying, so I descended into the Wonder Hole on a winch cable. When my boots finally touched rock, the circle of daylight above me seemed very small, and the beam cast by my electric torch was pitiful. The air smelt of sulfur, and my shirt clung to me in the stifling heat. I could see that the Wonder Hole opened into a cavern and that what looked like other tunnels went off at angles.

I tried to get a better look around, thinking that if there were diamonds there, I could bring a whole team down. But with better torches. Suddenly something glinted in my torchlight. If it was a diamond, it was big. I strained my eyes and tried to get an improved view. The ledge was too small for me to go anywhere, and the winch cable had run out. There was a second glint next to the first. They moved together, rising like eyes. Next, I heard a scraping sound, like a heavy leather sack being dragged across sand. I shouted to my team to hoist me up, and the glinting reflections disappeared. There was a shift in the air, and I was instantly surrounded by flapping bats. My torch tumbled from my hand and bounced off the ledge below. I watched the torch as my team pulled me up; it flickered out and crashed somewhere far below. I was relieved to be quickly out of there and decided to look in other places to make my fortune. Places that did not have a giant Grootslang guarding them.

Many reported sightings of the giant serpent Grootslang are concentrated around the Orange River in the Richtersveld, an arid, rocky landscape in the northwestern corner of South Africa. A sinkhole that descends straight down into the earth, before linking with the underground limestone cave network and making its way to the sea, is often credited with being the entrance to Grootslang's domain. The entrance hole is circular, nearly fifteen feet wide, and called the Wonder Hole.

Locals say that the caves are filled with gold, diamonds, and other precious stones jealously guarded by Grootslang. It is a cruel and cunning creature that lures prey into its lair at night and will devour trespassers. However, due to its greed for treasures, if caught by Grootslang, it may be possible to bargain for freedom if you have enough gold or diamonds, but there are no survivors to confirm this story. Over the years, many disappearances have been attributed to Grootslang, although the treacherous terrain is perilous enough. Many prospectors have gone missing while searching for diamonds, rather than having them to give away in exchange for their freedom.

As old as the world, Grootslang is a primordial creature that locals believe was erroneously made by the gods.

When the world was new, and the gods were filling it with their creations, they made many animals. But the gods were yet unpracticed at this, and they made a severe mistake. One of the first animals they made were the grootslangs. The gods crafted the grootslangs with the features of what we now call elephants and snakes combined. They had four legs, large ears and tusks, a long trunk, and a very long thick tail that slithered over the ground. The gods admired their powerful creation, but when they set the grootslangs upon the land, they realized that they were driven by their cunning natures, which was a disastrous combination when paired with their strength and intelligence.

The gods decided to destroy them, and to do this, they split them in half. One-half of each grootslang became an elephant with strength and intelligence. The other half became a python and kept the cunningness but was now less dangerous than before. This is why huge elephants have only skinny tails. Meanwhile, the very first grootslang had slipped away unseen and hidden in the underground caves, keeping its deadly combination of features for eternity.

Grootslang is Afrikaans for 'big snake,' although the appearance is described somewhat differently in the origin myth. The area renowned for Grootslang sightings was popular with prospectors, and there are multiple reports of three-foot-wide trails in the soft mud on the banks of the river that eventually disappear into the water. There are also eyewitness accounts of giant serpents claimed to be forty to fifty feet long. The area does have a history of giant pythons and even sightings of giant black crocodiles, likely contributing to the tales of Grootslang.

Locals say that to see Grootslang, with its glinting diamonds for eyes, is to feel its unnerving evil influence. This acts as a potent reminder of the perils of being driven by greed for valuable material possessions. Some things are better left alone, especially if the cost will be your life. So at this rate, Grootslang may jealously guard its treasure for the rest of time.

Chapter 19: Kiyohime

Origin: JAPANESE FOLKLORE



The senior priest had a dream. Only it wasn't quite a dream, neither was it reality, but an apparition in between. In his vision, two serpents appeared to him. One described himself as the young monk from the temple bell, reborn as a snake, and the other was his killer. The monk-snake told the senior priest that the actions of the vengeful serpent had bound them together in their next lives. If the senior priest would kindly transcribe the Lotus Sutra and dedicate it to him, it would free him from the cycle of suffering with this lustful creature. The snake-monk was sure the sutra would enable him to attain enlightenment and be delivered from suffering.

The senior priest did as entreated. He copied the Lotus Sutra, held the dedication ceremony, and everyone at the temple prayed reverently. Shortly after this, the senior priest dreamed of the two beings again, but they were wearing beautiful white robes and were no longer snakes. They spoke to him and thanked him for freeing them. Due to the Lotus Sutra, they had both left their serpentine bodies behind and now could be reborn in separate heavens, their fates no longer entwined. The two figures parted from each other and faded away into the heavens. The senior priest awoke with a profound feeling of peace and at once settled down to reread the Lotus Sutra. He was sure it would protect him from the attentions of lustful women like the passionate Kiyohime serpent.

Kiyohime was a fire-breathing serpent in a well-known Japanese folktale. With a long twisting body topped with spikes, she was coated in green and red scales. Her hideous face, surrounded by a green mane, comprised two bulging eyes and a single antler-type horn between two animal ears.

The tale of Kiyohime, the woman fueled by desire who turned into a serpent, really began as the story of Anchin the young monk and can be found in folktales from the 11th century onwards. Before the 18th century, Kiyohime was unnamed in these early stories, and her character varied from a widow or

wife to other female relatives. However, the underlying themes of the story remained unchanged.

As a monk was traveling on a pilgrimage to the Grand Shrines of Kumano, he stayed over as a guest in someone's home, as was the custom. The daughter of the household, Kiyohime, was very much taken with the handsome young monk and asked him to stay with her. He declined but said he would return this way after his pilgrimage and come back for her.

She waited and waited in anticipation, but he did not return. When Kiyohime saw some other pilgrims returning from Kumano, she hastened out into the street in her bare feet to ask if they had seen her young monk. They had, but he had gone a different way back, towards Dojo-ji temple. Feeling hurt and betrayed, she raced in that direction and caught up with him on the road. When she accosted him, he said she was mistaken, that it wasn't him she was looking for, and disappeared into the crowd. Ordinarily, Kiyohime would have felt shame, but instead, she became enraged and followed after him, gradually taking on some features of a serpent and spitting fire.

A ferryman had taken Anchin across the river to Dojo-ji temple, but he refused when Kiyohime asked him to take her across. The ferryman told her that the monk Anchin had instructed him not to take her in his boat. Forced to complete her transformation into a serpent, Kiyohime swam across the river, leaving her discarded clothes behind. At the temple, Anchin was hidden under the great bell, but she quickly sniffed him out. She wrapped her body around the bell, let forth a blast of fire, and burned him to death, leaving only charred remains. She then threw herself into the river and drowned.

This well-loved folktale represents the conflict between the force of pure and noble spirituality and the force of unbridled desire. It was an integral part of the Kumano pilgrimage to observe abstinence, and the most traditional versions of the tale

portray Kiyohime as lascivious and the monk Anchin as surprised and frightened by her advances. In other versions, he is not so dismissive of her less vulgar attentions. The picture scrolls in Dojo-ji temple that illustrate this story paint a sympathetic picture of Kiyohime resigned to wait patiently for Anchin's return. Only after he rejects her does she begin to turn into a serpent and succumbs to the lure of revenge.

A recurrent theme in Dojo-ji tales is the threat posed by lustful women because this was a tool used to warn the young male monks of the temptations of breaking their abstinence. The story is also used to highlight the power of the Lotus Sutra as one of the most venerated scripts in Mahayana Buddhism and a source of salvation.

Comparing different versions of the folktale, it is unclear who was most at fault at the outset, Kiyohime or Anchin, but maybe it is not supposed to be clear, and the two intertwined snakes at the end of the picture scroll could indicate this. The overall message seems to be that people should beware of excessive passion, reflect on their behavior, and always measure their words carefully.

Chapter 20: Scylla

Origin: GREEK Mythology



Sailing between a rock and a hard place, that's what the narrow strait promised. The captain had to choose between sailing close to a treacherous whirlpool, or a cave said to be a monster's lair. The whirlpool sounded a lot less far-fetched than a cave-dwelling monster, so the captain misjudged it as an easy choice. He gave the order to steer the vessel in the direction of the cave. His crew was looking out for strange currents when the captain heard a yelp, like a barking puppy coming from the rocky shore.

He remembered the stories then, of a savage monster that could not be fought, only fled from, with several hungry heads on long necks. With new fear, he looked towards the cave as out darted the gigantic beast herself. Before his crew had time to look around, six were snatched up by rows of jagged teeth in hungry mouths. The monster turned to fling her catch onto the rocks at the mouth of her lair. The captain knew not to stay and fight but to escape as quickly as possible, before losing another six of his crew to the voracious Scylla.

Scylla was a ferocious sea monster who lived in a cave on the coast of a narrow channel between Italy and Sicily. The Messina Strait is a narrow stretch of water between Italy and Sicily, with currents strong enough to rip up seaweed. It has opposing currents that alternate several times a day, causing whirlpools that are dangerous to smaller boats. This hazardous area undoubtedly inspired the tales of Scylla and Charybdis as an explanation for the natural phenomena and sailors lost to the waves. On one side of the strait lived Scylla, and on the other side lived Charybdis, a violent whirlpool who could sink whole boats. It was said that no ship could pass through this perilous area unscathed.

Scylla had six heads on long serpentine necks that would dart out of the cave and snatch sailors to devour. Each mouth had

three rows of shark-like teeth ideal for catching sea creatures such as dolphins when no boats were around. Scylla had the upper body of a beautiful woman but the lower body of a strange sea creature. In ancient vase paintings, she is often shown with a fish-type lower body and a waist sporting the heads and front legs of dogs. She is said to have twelve dangling legs, which are likely a combination of the dog legs and tentacles. Her voice was like a yelping puppy, but she was much more deadly than she sounded.

Most early stories give Scylla as the daughter of the sea god Phorcys and his wife Ceto, where Crataeis is cited as an alternative name for Ceto. However, in later Roman writings, she is given a tragic back-story.

Once there was a beautiful maiden named Scylla who lived by the sea. She often swam in the waves and played with the sea nymphs, the Nereids. They knew each other well and chatted happily about the events of their lives. On one of these occasions, when Scylla left the water to retrieve her clothes, Glaucus, the sea god of fishermen, spotted her and instantly fell in love with her. She saw his bristly face and sea-weed-covered upper body and wasn't sure if he was a god or a monster. Forgetting her clothes, she fled in fear.

Glaucus went to Circe, the goddess of sorcery, to ask for her help. He asked Circe to concoct a love potion to make Scylla enamored with him. Surprised and hurt, Circe confessed her love for Glaucus and tried to persuade him to make all parties happy in one go and accept her instead. Glaucus spurned Circe by saying that green leaves would sooner grow under the sea and seaweed on the hills than he would change his love for Scylla while she was alive.

Hearing this, Circe was overcome with rage and jealousy and made not a love potion but a poison from various herbs. Circe poured the poison into the pool where Scylla was known to bathe, chanting devilish words. When Scylla came there, she

waded waist-deep into the pool and was metamorphosed into a blood-thirsty monster with the lower body of serpents surrounded by dogs. Scylla was terrified and tried to flee, but the snapping jaws she was running from were now a part of her. Glaucus was heartbroken and collapsed into the embrace of the waiting Circe.

Scylla also features in the stories of the heroes Hercules and Odysseus. While Hercules was taking the cows of Geryon home, Scylla stole some of the cows. Hercules managed to kill her, but her father, Phorcys, restored her to life. On the return journey from the Trojan War, Odysseus had to sail through the strait with his men. The sorceress Circe advised him to sail close to Scylla instead of Charybdis. She explained that Scylla would take only six of his men if they sailed quickly, whereas they might all be lost to the violent whirlpool.

Early interpretations, where Scylla is a monster-daughter of sea gods, are that she represents the dangers of a treacherous stretch of water and offers an explanation for sailors lost at sea. In later versions, she is an example of an innocent woman being punished by the gods out of jealousy because someone else found her attractive.

Chapter 21: Zahhak

Origin: PERSIAN FOLKLORE



Rallying behind the three heroes, the people of the kingdom had their evil ruler surrounded. The angry mob was armed with whatever they had picked up on the way, and the three heroes had mace, hammer, and blacksmith's tongs. The evil ruler looked left and right for the opportunity to escape, but there was no opening. The pair of shiny black serpents on his shoulders kept the mob at a distance, striking out at anyone who came too close and spitting venom.

Someone in the crowd threw a stone. It had not been the only one, but it was the first to meet its mark squarely in the face. Torn skin opened up under the ruler's eye but, instead of blood, something black welled to the surface. A cockroach crawled out of the tear in his cheek, followed by another, running down his face. The crowd reeled in horror, and the ruler let out a wild laugh.

When the mace struck him on the head, he crumpled unconscious onto the street. The black snakes lay limply beside him in the dust, but more cockroaches poured from the mace wound on his head. The heroes realized they could not kill him, or the world would be overrun with vermin. The blacksmith threw his leather apron over the now seething body. They decided to bind him and leave him imprisoned in a cave at the top of the tallest mountain. And there Zahhāk would remain, chained for eternity.

Zahhāk is a tyrannical king who came to power by murdering his father. He followed much bad advice from Ahriman, the Evil Spirit, who appeared to him in several guises intending to bring indescribable suffering to humankind. To bring Zahhāk further under his control, Ahriman caused two black snakes to grow out of Zahhāk's shoulders. The snakes were bloodthirsty and craved human flesh and would have devoured Zahhāk's head had they not been kept fed by other means.

The character of Zakhāk famously appeared in Ferdowsi's Book of Kings, the *Shahnama*, which is one of Iran's most important folklore texts. It is an epic poem that tells the story of the rise and fall of this tyrannical leader.

An Arabian king had a son named Zakhāk. Zakhāk was a clever and attractive young man but easily influenced by the words of others. Because he was so easily persuaded, Ahriman, the Evil Spirit, decided to use Zakhāk for his own purposes. Pretending to be a friend, he convinced Zakhāk to take over his father's kingdom by leading him to fall down a pit on the way to morning prayers.

Next, Ahriman took on the appearance of the royal chef and prepared many fabulous meals for Zakhāk. After several days of feasting, Zakhāk asked to congratulate the chef and offered to grant him anything he desired. When Ahriman appeared before Zakhāk as the chef, he asked only to kiss each of his shoulders.

After kissing each shoulder, Ahriman vanished, and two vicious black snakes appeared on each of Zakhāk's shoulders. Zakhāk summoned the finest surgeons to remove them, but they only grew back again, exactly the same as they were before. A new physician came to the palace, but it was once again Ahriman in disguise. He advised Zakhāk to placate the snakes by feeding them a stew made from human brains to prevent them from attacking Zakhāk's own head.

Following Ahriman's advice, Zakhāk brought much suffering to the kingdoms he took over, including Iran, spreading chaos wherever he went. During Zakhāk's rule, two young people from the domain were sacrificed every day to feed the snakes until a trio of heroes came forward to challenge his authority.

The *Shahnama*, the Book of Kings, was inspired by ancient Persian mythology, though the names were changed to Middle Persian names. Zakhāk was based on the creature Aži Dahāka from Zoroastrian literature. Instead of a man with two serpents protruding from his shoulders, Aži Dahāka was a three-headed

demonic monster created by the Evil Spirit, renamed Ahriman in the *Shahnama*. The three-headed Aži Dahāka was strong and cunning and became a frightful overlord. His rule brought drought, ruin, and chaos which the Evil Spirit delighted in as it affronted the supreme deity or 'Wise Lord.' The struggle between good and evil continues in the *Shahnama*.

Though both Aži Dahāka and Zahhāk were overthrown and removed from power, neither could be killed, only captured, bound, and imprisoned. Aži Dahāka's story tells of a prophecy predicting his escape at the end of the world where he will ravage the land, consuming people and livestock, until another hero comes forward to defeat him.

The *Shahnama* became an important symbol of royal legitimacy and a powerful reminder of how a king should rule. It conveys the message that a king should reign righteously, endorsed by God, as poor leadership brings suffering and chaos to all people in the kingdom.

Zahhāk is invariably portrayed as a hostile outsider taking over Iran, reflecting inter-ethnic rivalries as different peoples invaded each other throughout history and prehistory. As well as the symbolic battle between good and evil, and the snakes representing torment, contained within Zahhak's story is a warning that heeding bad advice can lead to dire consequences.

Section Five | The Unusual Ungulates

Chapter 22: Tikbalang

Origin: FILIPINO FOLKLORE



In the darkness of the forest, a traveler walked quietly and deliberately. He had navigated this route before and knew where he was going. Didn't he? He was becoming uncertain. The moon was a thin sliver and afforded little light. The trees all began to look the same, and he thought that maybe he had missed the fork in the path or misremembered how far it was. He kept walking, peering up into the canopy nervously at every rustle he heard. His grandmother had warned him to wear his shirt inside out, but he had scoffed at her old-fashioned tales. Now though, he wasn't so sure, as the forest did seem to be playing tricks on him. Reaching a fork in the path, he went left but soon arrived in front of a balete tree he had definitely already seen tonight, its dangling air roots concealing hidden chambers. There was another rustle in the canopy, and a flurry of leaves floated down. Something was watching him.

Realizing that his grandmother's stories must be true after all, he stopped in his tracks. He quickly slipped off his shirt and pulled it back on inside out. He remembered something else she had told him and cleared his throat. 'Good evening,' he began aloud. 'I respectfully ask permission to cross your forest. Erm, please?' The trees rustled as if in reply, and the traveler ventured onwards. After a few minutes, he reached the same fork in the path again, although he could not explain how he got back to it by walking forwards. This time the moon shone a little brighter, and he recognized where he was and breathed a sigh of relief. It had worked. He could finally continue his journey safely without being misled by the Tikbalang. He whispered words of gratitude for his grandmother's advice and walked on.

The Tikbalang is a phantom or spirit that dwells in the forests. It likes to play tricks on travelers, leading them astray by making them take the wrong path until they are hopelessly lost and disorientated. While the Tikbalang is playing its tricks, travelers cannot find their way back to their correct path, no matter how hard they try.

Traditionally, people both revered and feared the Tikbalang and carried talismans made from natural materials to ward against it. Other countermeasures included wearing your shirt inside out, asking for permission to pass through the forest, and treading quietly to not disturb the spirits. Despite their mischievousness, Tikbalangs are considered essentially benevolent and protect the forest from people who might harm it.

It is said that the Tikbalang can shape-shift into any appearance and choose to be invisible at will. In more modern tales, the Tikbalang is depicted as a humanoid creature with equine features. It is commonly shown as having equine lower legs and hooves, a humanoid torso, human arms and hands, and an equine head. It is covered in brown hair and has a thick black mane and sometimes a long horse's tail. However, Tikbalangs are not in proportion, and their long legs cause their knees to be higher than their head when crouching down. They sit at the base of balete trees and wait for unsuspecting travelers to cross their path. Sometimes they are thought of as the spirit of the tree itself. According to folklore, it is possible to tame a Tikbalang.

In every Tikbalang's black mane, there are three golden strands of hair or three thick spikes. If a person is brave enough, they can leap onto the back of a Tikbalang and try to remove one of these golden strands or spines. The Tikbalang will object, and the would-be tamer needs a specially-prepared chord to survive the spirited ride. If the rider can stay on, the Tikbalang will eventually tire and admit defeat. If the rider removes one of the golden hairs or spikes and keeps it on their person, the Tikbalang will be forced to serve them. To prepare the chord, and because it represents a violation of nature, only magic-wielders would be likely to attempt this feat.

Early tales of the Tikbalang are no doubt ancient, and the evolution of its story mirrors the Philippines' historical changes through immigration and colonization. Before Spanish

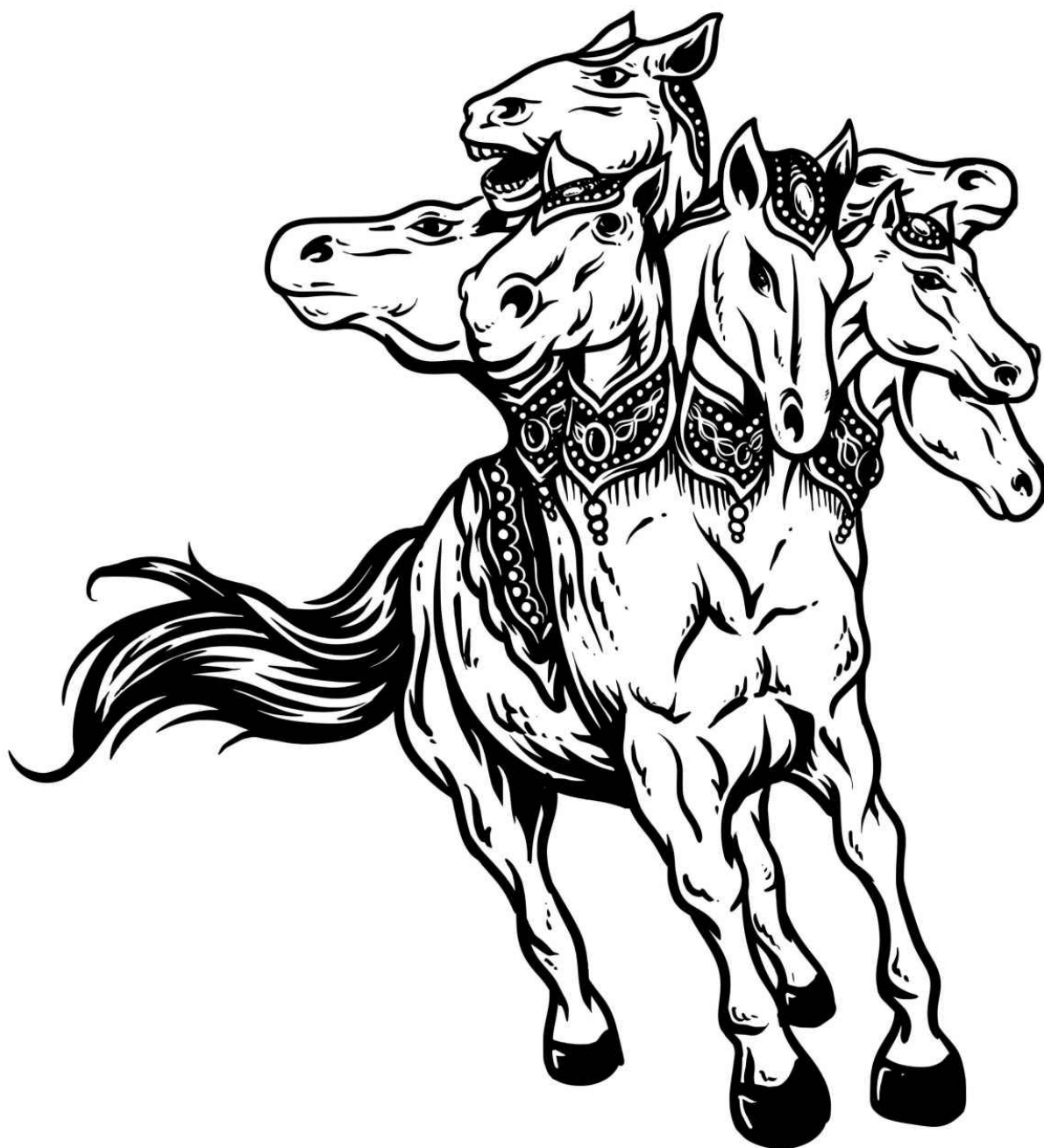
colonization in the 16th Century, there were no horses in the Philippines. So, before this time, Tikbalangs took a more ethereal form and were considered shape-shifting spirits. They were sometimes said to take the physical appearance of a friend or relative to better mislead their victim. There was a strong belief in animism in Filipino folklore, where natural entities have their own living spirit, and Tikbalangs were particularly associated with large old trees.

With immigration from India came Hindu influences to the physical appearance of the Tikbalang, from the deity Hayagriva, a horse-headed incarnation of the god Vishnu. Tales of Hayagriva certainly could have influenced the physical manifestation of the Tikbalang, even as the spirit remained largely unchanged.

The changing physical appearance of the Tikbalang over time reveals how migration and travel have influenced local myths and legends, bringing together different cultures in the melting pot of tradition. While Tikbalang can be considered the embodiment of the forest, especially old balete trees, it also explains people getting unfathomably lost in the forest, even when they ostensibly know the way.

Chapter 23: Uchchaihshravas

Origin: HINDU Mythology



The ocean of milk was being churned, and it was finally starting to separate. Indra and the other gods looked out eagerly for any objects that might be forming in the froth. The item they were waiting for was an elixir to restore the strength and immortality of the gods. Indra pulled the churning rope, which was a colossal snake's tail, as hard as he could while bereft of his usual powers. The other gods, also in a weakened state, pulled the tail with him. The middle of the snake was wrapped around a mountain that turned as they pulled, whipping up swirling white waves. At the head of the snake, pulled the demons. Back and forth the snake was heaved, spinning the mountain to churn up the milky seas.

Indra did not feel bad about tricking the demons into helping them. The gods had promised to share the ocean's bounty with the demons, including the elixir, but they had no intention of doing so. It was essential that only the gods drink the nectar of immortality to regain control of the universe; otherwise, everything would be lost to evil.

Something began to rise out of the foam, but it was not the elixir. It was a horse as white as the purest milk and as radiant as the moon. First, one head appeared, then another, until there were seven. The horse snorted and shook milky droplets from its body, and its many intelligent eyes took in the scene. The magnificent beast rose gracefully into the air, which itself seemed to glisten in adulation. All who saw the seven-headed horse, gods and demons alike, were transfixed by its splendor and desired it for their own. With great reluctance, Indra offered Uchchaihshravas, as a show of good faith, to the demons.

A snow-white stallion with seven heads, Uchchaihshravas came into being when the ocean of milk was churned by the *Devas*, the deities, and the *Asuras*, the demons. The supreme deities Lord Vishnu, the preserver, and Lord Shiva, the destroyer, worked to ensure that the *Devas* prevailed in obtaining the elixir

of immortality, the *amrita*, to regain control of the universe from the *Asuras*.

Uchchaihshravas was one of the fourteen treasures that separated from the milk, leaving only saltwater behind. Therefore, he is divine and immortal like the goddess Lakshmi, the *amrita*, and the wish-granting cow, among other fabulous treasures that were created at the same time. Some accounts say that Uchchaihshravas was initially given to the king of the *Asuras*. Despite this, Uchchaihshravas is most commonly known as the mount of Indra, the king of the *Devas*, although Indra also rode an elephant. With the ability of flight, Uchchaihshravas is also associated with the sun god's chariot.

Uchchaihshravas is considered the prototype and king of all horses. Traditional Hindu texts describe this stallion as divine, graceful, perpetually young, and a masterpiece of creation. He possessed such irresistible vigor that even Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, could not take her eyes off him and was overcome with admiration for her brother, as they were both born from the churning of the milk ocean. Lakshmi was so mesmerized by Uchchaihshravas that she unwittingly ignored Lord Vishnu's question to her, after which an offended Vishnu cursed her to take the appearance of a mare. Uchchaihshravas is also an innocent participant in another tale of strife.

A sage married two sisters Vinata, the mother of birds, and Kadru, the mother of snakes. Although they were sisters, they were endlessly jealous and constantly trying to best each other, and Kadru was particularly vindictive. One day, they heard that the miraculous seven-headed horse Uchchaihshravas would be nearby and immediately began to disagree about the nature of the horse. They argued in falsely polite language, for their bickering had bitter undertones.

Vinata knew Uchchaihshravas was pure white from the tips of its ears to the end of its tail. The scheming Kadru insisted that

the horse was a radiant white but with a black tail. They made a bet, and whoever lost would become a slave to the other.

Kadru knew Vinata was right but could not resist the opportunity to have her sister under her command. Kadru told her many serpent sons to cover Uchchaihshravas's tail so it would appear as black as charcoal. Some of her sons refused to participate in this dishonest act, and Kadru cursed them—they would burn to death for disobeying her. The remaining serpent sons were very much afraid and did as their mother commanded to avoid being cursed. They covered Uchchaihshravas's tail so thoroughly that not a single white strand of tail hair could be seen.

When the two wives went to see Uchchaihshravas the following morning, Vinata was horrified to discover that she had lost the bet and was now bound as a slave to her sister Kadru. And Vinata would have to wait a long time for her freedom.

In Hinduism, horses are used to represent a force carrying another force as they are vehicles of the gods. The name Uchchaihshravas combines *uchchais*, meaning 'upwards' or 'from high above,' and *shravas*, meaning 'rushing stream.' This conveys the idea of an uplifting or heavenly current for spiritual transformation. Like other white horses in mythology, Uchchaihshravas is also a symbol of purity and freedom.

Chapter 24: Nuckelavee

Origin: SCOTTISH FOLKLORE



The late winter sun rose slowly over the croft, gradually seeping through the clouds, spilling grey light over the fields. Margaret surveyed the morning as she pulled her boots on. It would rain before tea time. There was no grass to speak of at this time of year, so she wasn't surprised to see an empty field. The sheep occasionally went to eat seaweed, and once one decided to go to the beach, they all went.

Margaret opened a bale of hay, cutting the twine with her pocket knife. She hollered for the sheep while tossing the bale in sections, each leaf bouncing to release the scent of summer grasses and a hint of mold. But the sheep did not come, so Margaret walked the short distance to the coast, thinking that spring couldn't come soon enough.

Rounding the corner and stepping down onto the rocks, she covered her mouth and nose with her apron against the stench. It wasn't the sheep, although they were all dead, stretched out on the shingles as if they had fallen asleep and lost the desire to ever get up again. It was something else, something that had been dead for far longer. The loss of her whole flock was one thing, but the creature that stood amid them was something else. Even in the chill light of the morning, she clearly saw a horse and rider both without skin, just raw flesh, watching her. She could neither scream nor run, and she fought not to faint out of pure terror. Just as the fiery-eyed steed stepped towards her, the blessed heavens released a downpour, and the Nuckelavee disappeared back into the sea.

The Nuckelavee, or Devil of the Sea, is a malevolent shapeshifting demon that personifies evil and harm. It originates in the Orkney Islands, with a unique folklore culture blending Celtic and Norse influences.

Its natural habitat is the sea, and while no one can say what shape the Nuckelavee takes in the water, on land, it takes the

form of a horse with a legless rider fused onto its back. The horse has one blazing eye the color of fire, and the horse and rider both have oversized heads and wide mouths, spewing out noxious fumes that are poisonous to life. By this means, the Nuckelavee was blamed for wilting crops, sick livestock, and epidemics.

The Nuckelavee was also blamed for drought because it cannot withstand freshwater, including rain. Crossing a flowing stream is said to be the best way to escape its clutches. Sightings are often near the beach, such as the account provided by an Orkney farmer named Tammass:

Tammass was making his way home one clear starlit night. The road to his home lay between the sea and a deep freshwater loch. Suddenly, he saw a great creature coming towards him, but he had no way to escape. He was sure turning his back on it would be a mistake, so he said a prayer and reluctantly kept walking forwards.

The beast was a one-eyed horse with a rider growing out of its back, and he recognized it as the terrible Nuckelavee. The rider had a large lolling head and no legs of its own but long arms that nearly trailed on the ground. The horse's mouth was as wide as a whale's and spewed its steamy noxious breath into the night air. Tammass was appalled to see the Nuckelavee had no skin at all, and as it got closer, he could see black blood coursing through yellow veins and its red muscles and white sinews moving as it walked towards him.

Tammass knew he could not jump into the loch, which had its own creatures, but he nearly fell in trying to avoid the grasp of the Nuckelavee's long arms. He accidentally kicked up freshwater, splashing the monster's legs, and it shied in response. This gave Tammass the chance to run, and he took it. Tammass ran for his life and threw himself across the stream at the end of the loch, knowing that the Nuckelavee would not be

able to cross. When he looked up from the dirt on the other side, the stomping, snorting Nuckelavee had only his hat in its fist. The Nuckelavee left, and Tammias passed out in relief.

In Orkney, the water horse known as the Kelpie in many other parts of Scotland is called the Nuggle or Noggelvi. The similarities between the names, equine features, and evil natures indicate a shared origin. The unusual motif of a fused rider points to an outside influence, and several sources suggest Norse influences were added to the belief in the original Celtic water horse.

In fact, there is a little-known undead humanoid creature in Norse mythology with much in common with the Nuckelavee. The hideous Draugar, similar to a modern-day zombie, was thought to bring plagues and diseases and could wipe out whole herds of cattle, just like the Nuckelavee. The Drauger also had supernatural skills like shape-shifting and was accompanied by the stench of decay. To kill them, they had to be decapitated or burned and thrown into the sea. When Norsemen settled in Orkney, it is possible that stories of the Drauger and the Nuggle have combined over time to form the Nuckelavee.

The Nuckelavee represented ultimate evil and was used to explain various negative occurrences, from unpredictable weather and crop failure to sick animals and human diseases.

Chapter 25: Longma

Origin: CHINESE Mythology



He knew what the people said about him, and 'benevolent life-giver' was his favorite. 'Unpredictable' and 'destructive' he was not so fond of. And he thought 'greedy' was plain uncalled for. But the god of the Yellow River accepted that he had gotten a little carried away this time. With the autumn rains, his many tributaries had added generously to his boisterous currents. He had voraciously swallowed up the land, and it was difficult to see where the river turned into flood plain. It filled him with joy, all this magnificent, charging water, but his delight was tempered by the misery of the people whose lands and homes he had flooded. The river was so wide in places that, looking across from the opposite bank, they could not tell the difference between horse and cow.

The people just needed to get organized, and the god of the Yellow River thought a few pointers should be sufficient. So he made a document; a fabulous map etched into a jade tablet, including instructions on how to control the flooding. He wanted well-directed ditches, not trinkets and equine sacrifices. When the people had implemented his designs, he wouldn't have to worry about enjoying the rains, and people would refer to him respectfully again. Calling his faithful dragon-horse to him, the god of the Yellow River fastened the jade tablet onto its scaled back as it nudged him affectionately with its whiskery face. It was adept at finding worthy individuals to deliver sacred objects to, and he admired it fondly as it swam off with the current. Longma, the dragon-horse, always knew just what to do.

Longma literally translates to 'dragon-horse' and is also a term used for a wise and eminent person. This is particularly relevant because Longma was considered a symbol of virtuous leadership. In ancient China, horses up to a certain height were called *ma*, but the tallest of horses were called *long*, or dragons. Horses were said to be related to dragons, and as such, both had a strong association with water, particularly rivers.

Dwelling within the Yellow River, Longma had the shape of a horse but was covered all over in blue and red scales. It had oriental dragon facial features such as whiskers, pointed teeth, and a short horn protruding from the top of its head. Although Longma is occasionally depicted with a dragon's tail, it is more usually a swirling horse's tail. Longma had an upwards flowing mane like a dragon and a melodious neigh like the sound of a flute. Some accounts also give Longma feathery wings of various sizes, but with or without wings, Longma could travel in the water or sail through the air, covering hundreds of miles with ease. Longma could also walk on water if it chose to, without its hooves breaking the surface. Longma was considered a good omen that appeared only during the reign of an honorable ruler:

Emperor Yao had been on the throne for seventy years and felt it was time to resign and that Shun would make a great predecessor. Thanks to Shun, the floodwaters had been assuaged, and Emperor Yao would be eternally grateful. But he needed divine approval, so Emperor Yao had prepared a ceremony on the banks of the Yellow River. The shrine was built, the wise men consulted, and now they waited for the time between light and dark.

As twilight approached, the river began to shine, and beautiful swirling mists rose from the water, caught by the breeze. From out of the water stepped a dragon-horse, blessing them with its presence. It carried green, scaled body armor in its mouth, shaped like the broad shell of a tortoise and striped with dark red. The dragon-horse walked majestically up to the shrine, gently placed the armor upon it, and then walked away, disappearing back into the river. When Emperor Yao approached the armor, he saw a message coated in yellow gold, encrusted with white and green gems, and tied with a green thread. When he opened it, he saw that his heart's desire had been given the blessing of heaven, for it read, "With pleased countenance given

to Emperor Shun.” Emperor Yao could retire to a worthy successor with divine approval.

The ancestors of the traditional population of the Yellow River Valley afforded horses great importance as they were essential to their nomadic way of life. They even considered horses to be divine, like their close relatives, the dragons. In Chinese mythology, horses represent freedom, strength, and beauty, while the dragon is an auspicious symbol of power and vitality. Combined, the dragon-horse symbolizes a strong, vigorous spirit, representing freedom and divine blessing. Longma has both horse and dragon features because its mother was a mare and its father was a dragon that resided in a river. When the mare went to the river to bathe, it became pregnant by drinking the river water.

Seeing Longma was considered a good omen because it only appeared when a virtuous ruler was on the throne. A sighting foretold the appearance of legendary cultural heroes, the Three Kings and the Five Emperors, such as Emperor Yao and Emperor Shun. Longma is most renowned for delivering the Yellow River Map and the mystical Trigrams used for divination into the hands of the worthy.

Representing freedom, power, and vitality, Longma is a symbol of imperial authority, lending divine approval to just rulers.

Chapter 26: Abada

Origin: CENTRAL AFRICAN FOLKLORE



No one came here unless they were banished or crazy. Filipe hadn't been banished, but he was beginning to think he was crazy, trailing through these inhospitable mountains. Suddenly, the expedition leader dropped onto her belly and signaled to Filipe, flapping her hand up and down. He did as she had and crawled along on his stomach as quietly as he could over the rocks, wondering what had caught her attention. When he arrived at the leader's side, he saw they were at the edge of a cliff. He had been so absorbed in his thoughts he hadn't even seen it coming.

Spreading out not far below them was a green valley, and in the bottom, a herd of wild horses was grazing, with the occasional foal gamboling about. But as Filipe looked closer, he saw that they weren't horses at all. Their striped hindquarters were a different shape, and they had mostly hairless tails and short manes. As a cloud moved away from the sun, he noticed they were all chocolaty-brown with white lower legs and cloven hooves. A foal that had caught his eye turned to look straight up at him. With a sharp intake of breath, Filipe saw that it had a single cream-colored horn on its forehead. His heart raced, and he scanned the other creatures. Most had two small dark horns side-by-side, but scattered amongst the herd were several individuals with a single central horn. They had found the fabled valley of the unicorns.

There are many conflicting reports of the Abada, and little of the original oral traditions from which it sprang are recorded. When European explorers first traveled through Africa, many had heard rumors of what they called the African Unicorn. There are multiple accounts of sightings, although some are clearly confused with other animals, which were novel at the time.

In *A Short Relation of the River Nile*, the author explains that what other European writers were calling Abada was certainly the rhinoceros. The confusion seems to have been widespread,

and even a rhinoceros given to the King of Portugal, Sebastian I, was named Abada. Marco Polo wrote about how the Abada was not at all what he was expecting when he saw a dark thick-set beast with crooked horns on its nose when he was expecting a graceful unicorn.

But some testimonies are clearly about a different type of animal.

An experienced and respected Portuguese Captain was traveling in the company of twenty soldiers. One morning, they stopped to have breakfast in a small valley where the grass was ample for their horses, though it was surrounded by thick forest. The soldiers set their horses to graze and had just sat down when out from the densest part of the trees lightly sprang an extraordinary creature. It was the shape of a horse, dark brown in color, with a short, thin tail and mane, which were both black. On its forehead was a single, long, light-colored horn of superb beauty.

The creature bounded quickly and frivolously into their midst and didn't seem to notice the company until it was right among them. Then, with eyes full of fear, it ran about to make its escape. The horses were untroubled by it, and the spectators had time to admire its beautiful straight horn and were delighted with it.

The creature was in close range, but the muskets were not ready, so several soldiers tried to capture it. They recognized that it was the famous unicorn they had often heard about. But it evaded them and careered violently around them and back into the forest. The soldiers were disappointed to lose their prize but satisfied that the stories of the unicorn were true.

The modern conception of the Abada has two crooked horns side-by-side on its forehead. This seems to be adopted from the mistaken rhinoceros sightings with 'two crooked horns' interpreted as side-by-side instead of one above the other.

Rhinoceros horns were attributed with special medicinal powers, something else ascribed to the Abada. Available sources point towards the original folktales of the Abada having a single horn, which is why many referred to it as a unicorn.

While traveling through Africa, a Scottish explorer, William Balfour Baikie, had heard many native stories of a single-horned unicorn-type creature. He documented its many names in the countries through which he had traveled, Agába being one of those names. Baikie was initially skeptical of the stories but helpfully explains that the words he lists are distinct from the local terms used for the rhinoceros.

Other sources that seem to agree, and are not referring to the rhinoceros, describe a creature of rich reddish-brown color, sometimes with stripes, like a small and agile horse with cloven hooves. Its tail is described as similar to a wild boar's tail, thin and fleshy ending in a tuft of hair. It has a slender, straight horn on its forehead.

There is another creature that was consistently called the African Unicorn. Deep in the forests of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there is a rare and secretive animal with two horn-like protrusions on its forehead. The okapi, or forest giraffe, is an excellent match in terms of physical appearance, including color, stature, and countenance. They are so elusive they were only photographed in the wild relatively recently. However, their two horns are only short, so the mystery of the Abada continues.

Chapter 27: Erymanthian boar

Origin: GREEK MYTHOLOGY



The rich earth was freshly turned but not by any plow. Jelena surveyed the destroyed field in dismay as a sick feeling crept into the pit of her stomach. She uttered a curse under her breath as she wandered down the field. The crops were uprooted and eaten, and discarded sugar beet leaves were strewn across the ground and trampled into the mud by cloven hoof prints. Looking closer, the hoof prints were larger than any wild pig Jelena had ever seen, and no deer or cow could do this much damage. She was beyond aggravated about the loss of the beet crop; it was going to be lean times. Walking to the edge of the field, she looked despondently into the woods.

About to turn for home, a crashing sound came through the undergrowth towards her, accompanied by several rough snorts. To her dismay, it was a giant wild boar rushing straight at her. There was no time to flee for home, so she desperately scrambled up into the boughs of the nearest tree. The boar seemed mad with fury, thrashing its head around, and Jelena saw the broken shaft of an arrow jutting out of its flank. She took in its colossal size and bloodstained pelt and unwillingly felt a pang of pity for it, contrasting with her own feelings of anger that this creature had mangled her entire crop. Jelena had nothing with which to put the giant boar out of its misery, so she stayed up the tree, watching it. It looked just like the Erymanthian Boar.

Classical descriptions of the Erymanthian Boar say that it resided in the mountains of Greece, usually Mount Erymanthos, beside marshes and cypress trees. It would terrorize local groves and destroy the surrounding farmland. It was described as large and exceptionally heavy with a shaggy pelt, foaming jaws, and an untamable nature.

Mount Erymanthos, in Western Greece, was once considered a sacred mountain of Artemis, the Greek goddess of the hunt and wild animals. People believed that when she was angry or affronted, she would send a raging boar down from the mountain

to destroy the land. In this way, wild boars represented part of Artemis' nature because she was seen as capable of sudden vengeance and destruction.

Boars were common in Ancient Greece, and they would often raid farmland, destroying crops. They were sought-after for meat but were not easy to hunt. They were also unpredictable and violent when injured, earning them a ferocious reputation as people frequently had negative dealings with them. In ancient Greek art, this reputation of strength, courage, and ferocity is exemplified in multiple vase paintings, reliefs, and even coins. Depictions show boars as very muscular and with a vicious look.

This reputation made them suitable opponents for heroes and brave hunters, and for this reason, there are several myths involving boars in Greek mythology. The Erymanthian Boar is the most renowned as it was one of Hercules' twelve labors.

The Greek demigod Hercules was on his way to complete another labor; it was the fourth seemingly impossible challenge he had been set. This time, King Eurystheus had requested that the Erymanthian Boar be brought to him—alive. When Hercules reached Mount Erymanthos, where the beast lived, he sought it out. It was easy enough to find because of the amount of noise it made as it snorted and rooted around looking for food. Hercules frightened the beast down the mountainside with a mighty shout. It crashed through thickets and snowdrifts with Hercules in pursuit, never losing sight of it. It was bigger than any common boar, with fearsome sharp tusks in its foaming jaws. It tried to take cover in a coppice, but Hercules threw his spear in after it, injuring it. The boar ran until it was too exhausted to go any further. Hercules then captured it, bound it tightly, and slung the huge beast across his shoulders. It struggled infrequently, and its blood dripped down Hercules's back as he carried it all the way back to King Eurystheus's court in Mycenae. Everyone came out to see such a creature, and they were captivated by its ferocious

appearance and applauded Hercules enthusiastically. When King Eurystheus saw Hercules carrying the Erymanthian Boar, the very animal he thought was impossible to subdue, he promptly hid in a large bronze jar, too terrified to set eyes upon the beast for a moment longer. He would have to think of something even more difficult and dangerous for Hercules's next labor.

When left alone, wild boars are sociable creatures that are naturally shy of humans, and they are surprisingly light on their feet. They can do a lot of damage to farmland, but this is while rooting for food rather than manically charging about. However, if surprised, injured, or cornered, they are unpredictable and dangerous because of their sheer strength and sharp tusks, and mothers with young are particularly unyielding. Because boars are stocky, robust, and notoriously difficult to kill, this was interpreted as courage in ancient times. The fierceness they have been attributed with correctly represents the dangers of hunting wild boar.

It was only fitting that the Erymanthian Boar that Hercules was sent to obtain was an enormous and ferocious specimen. Representing strength, ferocity, and courage, as well as the vengeful capacity of the gods, wild boars made suitable opponents for hunters and heroes alike in ancient Greece and beyond.

Chapter 28: Indrik

Origin: SLAVIC FOLKLORE



A long time ago, in a distant land, there was a royal orchard. From sea to sea, there was no other place like it, and the monarch was very proud of the beautiful fruit trees. Grigory was on sentry duty, the night watch, to ensure the royal family's best-loved trees would be preserved and fruitful. Birds were known to steal the fruit, given the opportunity, day or night. Fighting sleep, Grigory was roused by the sound of wood cracking and breaking. He looked down from the walls and saw a fearfully large deer rubbing its antlers against the bark of the grandest apple tree, snapping branches as it did so. Grigory knew he would surely be punished for this damage. In fear of his life, never mind his job, he leaped down from his post and into the orchard, breaking into a run as soon as his boots struck the soft ground.

The deer was so large and muscular that it almost reminded Grigory of a bull, only it was far more graceful. It appeared mildly startled by Grigory's approach and pronged across the grass with unbelievable speed, a single bound covering a phenomenal distance. Grigory raced to follow it, his heart pounding, and was shocked when it suddenly disappeared into the earth. When Grigory reached the same spot, he came across a pit that had never been there before. Knowing there was little choice, Grigory jumped down into the hole after the giant deer. He fell and fell until he landed at the bottom of a deep crevasse. Finally regaining consciousness, Grigory found himself in a mysteriously lit subterranean world. He looked around and saw the giant deer regarding him, a horn between its intelligent eyes. It could only be Indrik, and that meant he had tumbled into the underworld.

Indrik is a beast from Russian folklore that is sometimes compared to a unicorn, although it can have one horn or two depending on the story and is given a more rugged appearance than a modern unicorn. The name Indrik is thought to be a distortion of the Russian word for unicorn, *yedinorog*, perhaps implying a single or at least a central horn. But while sources agree that Indrik is a horned creature, there is little agreement

about the number or placement of any horns. Some suggest a horn or two on the nose like a rhinoceros, others a single horn on the forehead, or two next to the ears. Antlers are an addition based on the deer-like descriptions of the creature. It is described as having a horse's head, the body of a bull, and a deer's legs. This means Indrik is either a chimera, a mixture of creatures, or the descriptions are illustrative rather than literal, describing a gigantic deer with a more equine than bovine head and a large muscular body reminiscent of a bull. The second approach seems more credible because the parts mentioned are not incongruous like a typical chimera and are from similar animals.

In Russian fairy tales, Indrik is portrayed as an opponent of an evil serpent. In other stories, Indrik takes golden apples from the royal grove instead of the more standard version of the Firebird stealing the fruit. Often, a hero will venture into the underworld on a quest to find Indrik to make him his magical steed. The story of golden fruit, a trip to the underworld, and a magical ride has clear Persian influences from strikingly similar folktales. The idea of Indrik being the father and ruler of all animals also has Persian roots where all natural entities were assigned to kingdoms with corresponding chieftains.

Indrik is described as the father of all beasts in the *Book of Doves*, a spiritual verse from medieval Russia.

Indrik is the father of all beasts and the king of all animals. He lives in the Holy Mountain, where he eats and drinks, and where no other foot may tread. Stone mountains cannot hold him as he moves through another realm with his horn. As regularly as the sun moves across the sky, so he walks at will throughout the underworld. The streams that come rushing out of the mountains all belong to him. He ensures the underground channels and gullies bubble up as springs that fill the rivers and lakes. When he stirs, the ground trembles, and he rises up out of the damp

earth. Wherever he turns, wherever he goes, below land or above, no harm comes to those animals who worship him. And all animals revere him, as Indrik is the beast of all beasts.

Depicted as the ruler of all animals, Indrik lives underground in an otherworldly place. He has life-giving associations by being the father of all animals, or the mother of all animals in some older versions, and being linked to nourishing water. Indrik also symbolizes mystical protection for the animals that worship him. He is neither malevolent nor harmless. Indrik does not seek to cause harm but can make a formidable ally to various heroes, helping them with their quests.

Indrik has captured the imaginations of gamers via the Elder Scrolls, where an array of glorious and magical deer-like 'Indriks' have been created with iridescent antlers and a single horn on their foreheads. They also have a deep-rooted connection with the earth, can walk between worlds, and are just as mysterious and majestic as the Russian Indrik they take their inspiration from.

Section Six | Aquatic Beasts

Chapter 29: Vodyanoy

Origin: SLAVIC FOLKLORE



The tundra surrounding the lake was still mostly white, and it would be a while longer before the scrubby birch burst into green. From his boat, the fisherman took stock while he waited, his net draped over the side. It was a fine spring day, and the ice had finally melted, the water level lifted by the rushing snowmelt careering down the tributaries. The fisherman was wary of the currents this created but believed that the greatest rewards involved risk. To be on the safe side, he removed a glove and sprinkled a generous pinch of tobacco onto the surface of the water. No sooner had he got his glove back on when he heard a hefty splash, some distance away. He looked for it, thinking it might be a large sturgeon, but couldn't even see ripples.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, the fisherman saw movement off the side of the boat. When he turned to look, he saw the top half of a strange head. With a mischievous glint of fire, two big eyes stared back at him from a pale green face. The fisherman fell to the floor of the boat in fright. When he peered over the side, he saw a wide mouth open, taking in the tobacco. The mouth chewed and grinned at him, then disappeared under the water with the flick of a black tail. The fisherman gaped in awe and shock. He felt his net tug and hoped he hadn't caught it. But when he checked, his net was overflowing with fish. His tobacco, the first offering of the year, had been richly rewarded by Vodyanoy.

With origins in Slavic paganism, Vodyanoy is a shapeshifting nature spirit that lives in freshwater, and the name means 'watery,' 'aquatic' and 'merman' in Russian. In Russia, Vodyanoy appears as an old frog-like man with green skin and a black scaly fish tail in place of legs. He has a long green beard and hair covered with water weeds. The fingers on his hands, or paws, are webbed, and he rides a half-sunken log making loud slaps or splashes on the water.

Further south, in Czech, Slovene, and Slovak tales, Vodyanoy is called Vodnik and has a more humanoid appearance, with webbed feet, although a tail also features, with the ability to shapeshift. In these stories, he wears clothes and can walk on land but is identified by permanently dripping wet coat tails.

In pre-Christian belief, Vodyanoy was not good or evil but a guardian of the lake or river he resided in who could be offended or pleased. People used to make offerings of food or sacrifice a hen. When appeased, Vodyanoy could ensure plentiful water and successful fishing. However, when angered, he could break dams, cause floods, and drown people and livestock.

As Christianity overtook paganism, Vodyanoy was molded into a synonym for the devil. Stories became more sinister, featuring drowning for vindictive pleasure, eyes burning like hot coals, and the addition of horns. Common beliefs were that you could avoid being drowned by Vodyanoy if you did not bathe on holy days or without wearing a cross or crossing yourself before entering the water, highlighting Christian influences.

You should also avoid bathing after sunset and near strong currents to avoid being captured or killed. A poem by K. J. Erben, '*The Water Goblin*', tells the story of a young woman captured by a Vodnik:

The Vodnik sat in a poplar tree, sewing his wedding outfit by the light of the moon. When morning came, the miller's daughter told her mother she was going to the lake to wash the clothes. Her mother begged her not to because she had a premonition the night before. But the daughter was drawn by an invisible force. As soon as she put the first handkerchief into the water, she fell into the swirling depths. The green man in the poplar cheered and went to join her. The Vodnik married her with fish for bridesmaids, and later, they had a child. The underwater realm was cold and silent like grief in a heart without hope.

The abducted wife sang to the baby of her desperation and grief. Her husband horrified her, and she discovered that he kept human souls under the teacups. She would prefer to be dead on land than a prisoner in his watery court. She sang to her child as it was her only joy. The Vodnik told her to stop singing, or he would turn her into a fish. She begged him to let her visit her mother to say goodbye. He agreed, but she had to leave the child hostage and be back by evening. Mother and daughter were reunited, but when the evening bells rang, the mother would not let her daughter depart. The Vodnik came several times to say she must come back to cook his dinner, make his bed, and feed the child. The daughter begged her mother to let her go for the sake of the baby. The mother refused and told Vodnik that he could eat what he could find, make his own bed, and bring the baby to their doorstep. There was a thud outside the door, and blood seeped beneath it. Vodnik had left the baby but in two halves.

Traditionally neither good nor evil, Vodyanoy was the guardian of lakes and rivers. Transformed from a powerful pagan spirit to a malevolent murderer by Christianity, Vodyanoy became a potent reminder about the protective power of the cross and the dangers of bathing in lakes and rivers after dark.

Chapter 30: Melusine

Origin: EUROPEAN FOLKLORE



Deep in the woods, Raymondin's horse carried him past the fairy fountain. In a reverie, cocooned in his troubles, Raymondin did not notice the woman there. But she noticed him. She stopped his horse and reproved him for not greeting her politely. When she got no response, she was inclined to anger until she saw he was asleep. She tugged his hand to wake him. At first, he was shocked and afraid, but she soothed him with kind words. "There is no battle; I am on your side," she said with a warm smile. Feeling reassured, he admired her beauty, her long golden hair spilled in glowing waves down past her shoulders, and her white dress shimmered in the splashes of dappled light. She really was the fairest woman he had ever seen, and he dismounted and begged for her forgiveness. Time passed, and he asked her to marry him. She accepted, but only if he promised to grant her a full day and night of privacy each week. He agreed, but one day he would break his vow and live to regret it, discovering his loving wife Melusine was not quite a woman after all.

Melusine was the guardian fairy of springs and freshwater sources in ancient Europe. Her mother was the fairy Pressina, and her father was a mortal king, King Elinas of Albany, present-day Scotland. When Melusine sought to punish her father for a perceived wrongdoing, Pressina reprimanded her with a curse that would transform her into a hybrid creature every Saturday.

Based on earlier oral folktales, the oldest stories give Melusine a serpent tail and other dragon-like features such as two feet and wings. Later adaptations embellish Melusine's tail as blue-glazed and covered with round silver speckles. There was also a distinct shift in iconography from a serpentine tail to a mermaid's fish-like tale. This was due to her strong associations with water, through springs and bathing, but it also served to make her appearance less gruesome and more appealing. She was sometimes depicted with two fish tails, and some consider her to be the motif behind the two-tailed siren of the ubiquitous Starbucks logo.

Translations of Jean d'Arras's *Tale of Melusine* from 1478 highlight the suffering and heartbreak caused by broken promises and lost trust:

Raymondin and Melusine had been married for many years. They had nine sons, and their domain was peaceful and prosperous, and agriculture flourished. Raymondin still didn't know why his wife needed a whole day of privacy on a Saturday and spent most of the day in the bath. He had buried his curiosity years ago, but his brother had recently turned it into jealousy by suggesting that Melusine was with another man every week. On hearing this accusation, Raymondin was filled with suspicion and rushed to the bathing room. He made a small hole in the door with his sword and peeped through. Inside the long marble bath was his wife, but from the navel down her body was a great serpent, as thick as a barrel. He was filled with sorrow, not because of her monstrous transformation, but because she was alone, and he had let the provoking words of his brother get the better of him. He filled the hole in the door with wax so no one else would see. But he had broken his vow to his wife, and now he would lose her. He wept for the entire night.

In the morning, his wife returned and, seeing his distress, asked him what was wrong. Raymondin replied that he had a fever but felt better now she was there. She silently forgave him his trespass, and they both continued as if it had never happened. However, one day, in a fit of anger over an unrelated matter, Raymondin called Melusine a 'false serpent' and their children 'specters.' He immediately regretted it, but the damage was done, and Melusine's secret was revealed. With a heavy heart, Melusine explained she was not permitted to stay with him now and was condemned to a life of suffering. They embraced each other, filled with sadness at the loss of their best friend and spouse. Melusine's parting words to him were advice on the domain and their children. With a painful sigh, she transformed into a tremendous long serpent, left her two clawed footprints on

the stone windowsill, and flew off into the sky. Her sad cries circled around the palace, and then she disappeared. Melusine's heartbroken cries can still be heard in the wails of the wind.

Melusine was a hybrid in more ways than one. Besides her serpentine or piscine transformations, she was of mixed fairy and human birth. In addition, she combined what was, at the time, seen as distinct feminine and masculine roles. She was both a loving matriarch and wielded authority in the domain, building castles and overseeing agricultural practices for the benefit of all. Her stories raised questions about power and gender, as well as the damage that can be done by words spoken in anger and the act of breaking vows made in good faith.

Chapter 31: Abaia

Origin: MELANESIAN FOLKLORE



The floods had moved the boulders in the river, so Tarlae ventured upstream for a place to bathe. When she found a pool deep enough, between large rocks, she climbed in. The cool water was a delicious respite from the heat and humidity of her island home. The late afternoon light filtered through the tropical leaves, and all was quiet, except for the babbling of the stream and the friendly jungle fowls preening nearby.

As she daydreamed in the water, two large eyes peered out from beneath a rock at the bottom of the pool. When Tarlae eventually noticed, she quietly slipped out of the water and hastily pulled on her clothes. She was not sure whose watery retreat she had intruded upon, but she had a hunch. It started to rain, and she took shelter under a tree at the water's edge. She kept very still and watched the pool intently. Dusk fell, and she waited even though her clothes were soaked by the rain. Soon a large head emerged from the pool, followed by a sleek, thick, serpentine body. It writhed its way upstream, moving over the boulders with ease. Other eels had emerged from their secret hiding places and moved equally silently, but the one from Tarlae's pool was by far the largest. She was sure her hunch was right. Abaia was on the move.

In beliefs extending from the Solomon Islands to Fiji and the Vanuatu Islands, Abaia is a giant eel that lives in the bottom of a freshwater lake. It is said to have magical powers enabling it to whip up large waves with its muscular tail. It is also linked to heavy rain and flooding and protects all of the creatures in its lake as if they are its children, acting fiercely territorial. Incidentally, in Gilbertese, spoken in Fiji by the Banaban people, *abaia* means 'territory.'

Melanesia's most enormous freshwater eels are giant mottled eels, and females can grow to over two meters in length. As well as their large size, they have an enigmatic reputation. They are

born at sea and migrate up rivers and streams to live in freshwater pools and lakes, where they remain for decades. They can travel out of water happily, from waterway to waterway, as long as conditions are damp. Rows of sharp teeth mark them as carnivores. They hunt at night and are usually completely hidden during the day in networks of underwater caves or channels under rocks. The largest giant eels are a dark mottled brown with pale undersides. Some females live to one hundred years old before returning to their largely unknown breeding grounds in the ocean, where they spawn and are never seen again. If Abaia was not imagined as a giant mottled eel, it was almost certainly inspired by one. The most cited story of Abaia demonstrates a perceived link between tragic events and supernatural causes.

In the village of Gavi, the people no longer eat fish, and for a good reason. There was once a man who went hunting on his own, except for his dog. They walked and walked, but they only found one wallaby, so they walked some more. They came across a circular lake, Lake Wapogi. The dog ran up to the lake and quickly caught a fish in its jaws. The man was pleased to see it was teeming with fish. He didn't know there was a magic eel living at the bottom of the lake. He marked the route, returned home, and roasted and shared the wallaby. The following morning he told everyone to come with him to a place with lots of fish, and they did so, leaving the young children in the care of the older children.

When they arrived at Lake Wapogi, the women cast their hand nets, and the men built a drying rack to smoke the fish, prawns, and eels, for they had already caught many. One skillful woman even caught hold of Abaia, but it slipped from her grip. When evening came, the people ate and slept. But the eels did not rest. Abaia instructed all of the remaining eels to travel to every river and bring the water spirits, so the people who ate from the lake might be punished. When the eels returned, dark

clouds followed them, and heavy rain fell until the land was flooded and all the people had drowned. Only one woman survived. She, being a witch, had recognized that the fish were not ordinary fish but belonged to Abaia, and she had not eaten any. She escaped the floodwaters by climbing a tree, and they only stopped rising when she reluctantly threw her dog, which had eaten some fish, into the water. When the waters subsided, she returned to the village to raise the children who had been left behind, warning them that they should never eat fish in case they belonged to Abaia.

Abaia represents the unknown lurking in the depths, the idea that there is something threatening and unseen under the surface of lakes and deep pools. The freshwater eels of Melanesia are secretive by nature, creeping over the land at night and traveling great distances inland and out to sea as part of their life cycle. Abaia reflects the mysterious character of freshwater eels, the power of water, and acts as a reminder that natural resources and wildlife should be respected and preserved.

If one female giant mottled eel never returned to the sea to spawn, maybe it would just keep growing to an enormous size, and with access to a hidden underground cave network, no one would ever know.

Chapter 32: Adaro

Origin: MELANESIAN FOLKLORE



I can't remember how I got here. I am not dead, but I am not living either. They are keeping me under the sea but took me up to the surface to gloat and show me my body. It was sat on the beach, looking out to sea with a forlorn expression, waiting for me to return. But I don't think my body could see me. It had turned the white-gray color of a bonito fish, and I barely recognized myself. I tried to call out but couldn't. Strong webbed fingers gripped me, although I can't explain how they can hold a shadow so tightly. They took me back below and gave me a new name, and now I can't remember mine. I refuse their strange food when I remember to because it makes me feel further from my home, like it is floating away from me. I try not to look at their vicious faces. They move swiftly through the water with their menacing shark fins on their heads and flippered feet. I wait for my wise grandmother. My only hope is a dream-rescue, to release me from the Adaro of the deep. I am not sure if she will find me.

The Adaro of the deep are malevolent spirits that live in the ocean. In the Solomon Islands, they are called *adaro ni matawa*, spirits of the deep sea, as opposed to the *adaro* or 'spirits' that haunt the land. The Adaro of the sea spread sickness and death by shooting needle-nosed garfish or poisonous flying fish at people and stealing their souls by drowning them. The Adaro are humanoid in shape with fins instead of feet and webbed fingers. They have gills behind their ears and on the top of their head is a shark's dorsal fin. This is often accompanied by a spike similar to a swordfish's, giving them a threatening appearance to match their evil tendencies.

In antiquity, Solomon Islanders made carvings of the Adaro to protect the canoe huts of chiefs. Offerings of almonds, taro, and flying-fox teeth were made to try to ensure successful fishing trips. Fishermen were said to look out for rainbows as this was a pathway of the Adaro who liked to stalk the souls of people at sea, often young men out fishing.

As well as taking the spirit or soul, causing the death of the physical body, some accounts describe 'shade-theft' where the spirit is held captive by the Adaro, but the physical body remains alive. However, the victim suffers from shade-separation sickness, called *sigi nunu*, as the body becomes increasingly detached from the physical world, refusing to eat or speak for example, as the stolen spirit becomes more integrated into the underworld realm of the Adaro. The only hope is for a magician, or dream-curer, to retrieve the stolen spirit and return it to the body.

Children are said to be particularly vulnerable to Adaro attacks because they are more likely to unwittingly offend the Adaro, leading them to be drowned. Spirits of the dead or taken may appear to the living, but they will forever be invisible to their relatives.

The boy was only young at the time, and one day he was canoeing on the sea. The weather was fine, and the wind and waves were gentle. A strange fish flopped into his canoe as if it had been thrown. Then, the deep-sea Adaro capsized his vessel and made an opening in the water that he fell through into their underworld realm. He had lived with his mother and father before that, and they searched for him. As evening came, they wept bitterly when they still could not find him. Later, his spirit tried to visit his parents, but they couldn't see him. A stolen spirit is always invisible to relatives, and they would never lay eyes on him again.

The Adaro are ruled by a chief named Ngorieru, whose image is featured on the ten cents coin of the Solomon Islands. Ngorieru is depicted in the same way as the Adaro he presides over, but some carvings give him three dorsal fins on his head, with the additional two taking the place of ears. His hands are also fin-like as opposed to webbed fingers. On the ten cents

coin, Ngorieru has a more fish-like head than the Adaro and a tail reminiscent of a dolphin.

The Adaro were an explanation for drowned children and fishermen in particular, but the beliefs also offered an explanation for mental afflictions where an individual may appear to be not fully present. People thought that part of their soul was being held captive by the Adaro, and that's why their loved ones seemed lost to them, even though they were still alive.

Melanesia was subjected to European colonization and Christianity, and missionaries in the Solomon Islands tried to persuade people that the Adaro were fallen angels doing the work of the devil. Due to colonization, much of Melanesia is now Christian, and many of the hundreds of languages are creoles.

Accounts of the Adaro highlight how identity is closely intertwined with family and homeland in Melanesian culture. Under foreign rule, many people were forced to leave their homes to make way for mining or to work on cotton plantations on other islands. Young people being taken over the sea in this way offers a stark example of separating individuals from their homeland, family, and identity, just as the Adaro did.

Chapter 33:Bukavac

Origin: SLAVIC FOLKLORE



*Enjoying the warm evening, Dmítar had been for a walk and was returning home along the riverbank. A keen birdwatcher, he had admired the starlings as they put on an excellent murmuration display, swirling around like shoals of fish in the darkening sky. Dmítar heard a booming cry that made him jump. It came from the water. It's just a bittern, he thought, even though it sounded nothing like a bird. Spooky how such a big un-birdlike sound can come from a small waterbird. He mentally recited some facts to calm himself down. Probably a Eurasian bittern, yes, *Botaurus stellaris*, speckled plumage. Nicknamed the bog-bull for its unlikely voice. He felt better already.*

Specialized esophagus muscles, that was it.

It's just a bittern, Dmítar reminded himself when he heard it again, closer, although his heart still raced without his approval. After a few more steps onward, he saw a large patch of reeds flattened as if they had been sat on by a giant. At the water's edge lay a cow, perfectly motionless, half in and half out of the water, nostrils submerged. It looked like its neck had been crushed. There was a shadowy movement, and a horned head on a many-legged body leaped out of the reeds towards another nearby cow. Thoughts of waterbirds vanished from Dmítar's mind, and he turned and fled before Bukavac crushed the life from his body too.

Bukavac is an elusive and regionally-specific creature that belongs to Syrmia, an area straddling the border of Croatia and Serbia between the Danube and Sava rivers. Allegedly, strangled animals were once found near the River Sava. The blame was placed on Bukavac, a water-dwelling creature who lurks in marshes, lakes, and rivers. It is said to leap out at night and choke livestock or people passing by. Because it lurks underwater and amid the reeds and grasses, there is little consensus of what it looks like. Bukavac is generally imagined to resemble an enormous frog or lizard, with six legs, antlers or gnarled horns, slimy skin, and a long tail. As it seems to kill but

not eat its victims, it can be considered purely malicious, leading people to refer to Bukavac as a demon.

Bukavac makes a loud hideous shout in the night, and *buka* means 'noise' in Croatian, leading some to say that its name means 'noisy.' However, the word *bukavac* translates to 'bittern' in Croatian, a waterbird. The secretive Eurasian bittern is rarely seen out in the open, preferring to skulk in reed beds and grasses surrounding water bodies, just like Bukavac. The call of the male bittern resembles a bellowing bull and the boom of a fog-horn. On calm nights it can easily be heard several miles away. Calls are most often heard on spring evenings during the birds' mating season. Traditionally it was a mystery how a relatively small bird could make such a loud, low-pitched sound, so people attributed it to a mysterious beast.

Another similar creature from Slavic folklore is the Drekvac, meaning 'screamer.' Like Bukavac, it makes loud, terrifying noises and is more active at night and in the spring, like the bittern. The story of '*Brave Mita and the Drekvac*,' by Branko Ćopić, has many things in common with Bukavac of Syrmia.

One spring evening, fishermen were hauling nets in the River Sava. From the darkness came a piercing call that made the fishermen quake with fear. The oldest fisherman whispered that it was a howler. The fishermen were superstitious and believed that the call of a howler foretold disease, caused boats to sink and carts to run into muddy swamps and canals. The fishermen quickly pulled in their nets, ignoring the carp and other fish that were jumping out. They hurried back to their village and told everyone what had happened. The villagers were horrified and locked themselves in their homes, too frightened to even cross the street. Only Mita, the twelve-year-old son of a fisherman, didn't believe the story. He was an intelligent, educated boy, strong and brave, and he didn't believe in witches, werewolves, or howlers.

By the third night of no fishing, there was a noticeable shortage of food, so Mita decided to go and discover the creature that screamed in the night. In his father's boat, he followed the strange calls across the river. Mita ran aground on the opposite shore and stepped barefoot into the mud. He shivered in fear when he heard the scream very close but thought it sounded a bit like a wild duck. He crept into the reeds and saw the culprit making its strange sound by the light of the moon. Mita managed to catch it and wrapped it up in a piece of fishing net. He took it to the village and showed everyone their howler. The bird was a bittern, most vocal in spring, scaring the superstitious who thought it was a monster. And from that day, no one in Mita's village believed in the howler anymore and went back to fishing on the river.

This story is consistent with Bukavac being a type of Drekač associated with water, specifically in the Sirmia region. When people didn't know the haunting sound was made by a bittern, they would have been more likely to call the mystery creature 'screamer' than 'bittern.'

The secretive skulking behavior of Bukavac has a lot in common with the bittern and was used to explain the strange sounds emitted from the reeds on spring nights. Bukavac illustrates how adept human minds are at filling in the blanks to ascribe meaning to the unknown.

Chapter 34: Timingila

Origin: HINDU Mythology



The ocean surged and covered the land in devastating floodwaters. The Sage felt helpless and exhausted as he searched for a place to cling to, swept along by the raging water. Weak with hunger and thirst, battered by wind and waves, he had lost track of time and any sense of direction. There were monsters in the water, and it seemed only his prayers had saved him from being devoured thus far. Every so often, he saw a giant gray fin coming towards him, and then it would disappear. The Sage continued to pray to the gods he loved so well, and when he opened his eyes, he saw a tree. Its uppermost branches were sweeping out over the water, debris dangling like prayer flags. He swam towards it and, with great effort, hauled himself out.

On the branch above him, he was amazed to see a cooing baby lying on a leaf. He marveled at it, and the baby laughed. Then, with an intake of breath, the baby inhaled the Sage into its mouth. Initially enveloped in gloom, the Sage heard a voice and knew intuitively that it was Lord Vishnu. From inside the baby's stomach, Lord Vishnu showed the Sage the entire universe: the sky and the earth, the heavens and the oceans. With an exhalation, the Sage found himself returned to the branch, next to the baby, sleeping peacefully. In the distance, the giant shark-like creature still moved in wide circles around the tree. He knew Lord Vishnu, appearing as the baby, had saved him from Timingila.

Timingilas are mentioned in several Vedic texts and are usually included in lists of sea-dwelling creatures such as turtles, whales, sharks, and Makaras. In Sanskrit, Timingila means 'whale swallower' because they were thought to be so large and predatory that they could swallow a whale in one go. From the descriptions in the Vedic texts, the Timingila is an enormous ocean-dwelling beast so vast it looked like a great rock submerged in the ocean rather than an animal.

The Timingila has been compared to the Megalodon shark, one of the largest and most powerful ocean predators to have ever existed. Megalodons were thought to be coastal predators that probably targeted some species of whales, as well as sea turtles and seals. However, the Megalodon was still much smaller than blue whales, the largest animals known to have ever lived. In addition, the Megalodon went extinct well before the emergence of *homo sapiens*, so no human would have ever seen one. Nevertheless, the Megalodon is the most relevant template for imagining what the Timingila would have looked like.

In the Hindu epic the *Ramayana*, the hero Lord Ram saw Timingilas in the sea between India and Sri Lanka

Ram needed to traverse the ocean to rescue his wife Sita from the demon lord Ravana in the kingdom of Lanka. The problem was, he had no way to cross, and Varuna, the sea god, was not answering him. Ram grew tired of inaction and swore he would kill every sea monster in the ocean if it meant he could lead his army across to Lanka. Rama shot his fiery arrows into the murky depths, and various tremendous sea monsters were dashed upon the shore. Startled by the disruption, many more sea creatures, including the fiery-eyed Timingilas and Makaras, whales, and sea turtles, raised their heads. Ram's brother Lakshman tried to reason with him and calm his fury, but Rama insisted that he would kill every sea creature if he had to. Before Ram wreaked further havoc, the sea god Varuna appeared at last and explained that the ocean was needed as part of the balance of the universe. Varuna bid Nala the monkey, the divine engineer and a member of Rama's army, to construct a bridge so they could safely pass over the sea monsters and into the kingdom of Lanka. When it was built, Varuna held the ocean steady while Rama and his army crossed Nala's magnificent bridge and continued their quest to rescue Sita.

Nala's bridge, also called Adam's Bridge and Rama Sethu, can be seen clearly in NASA photography, although it is natural rather than man- or monkey-made. Additionally, a thin spit of sand and coral islands historically connected India and Sri Lanka

and is referred to in several sources. The Gulf of Mannar remains one of Asia's most biodiverse aquatic habitats, hosting a range of sea turtles, sharks, dolphins, sea cows, and whales that were no doubt the inspiration behind Timingila.

In the Vedic texts, Timingilas are invoked to represent the danger and destructive powers of the ocean but also destruction in general. Great warriors that could destroy many soldiers were compared to the Timingilas as great devourers. For example, in the epic *Mahabharata*, the hero Arjun was compared to a fish, even though he was considered a great archer, while the enemy commanders were compared to Timingilas because they could 'swallow up' so many soldiers. The story is used to highlight the protective powers of Lord Krishna to save Arjun against such a destructive enemy.

While Timingilas have been likened to the long-extinct Megalodon, and thought to be large enough to swallow some species of whale whole, they were also a broad analogy for a devouring, destructive force.

Chapter 35: Rusalka

Origin: Slavic Folklore



Along the riverbank, Benedek tended to his crops under the warm June sun. The land was fertile here, and Benedek felt sure his yield would be high again this year. He rested in the shade under a willow tree and watched the birds wheel and wend, waiting for the evening sun to cast its golden hue across the fields. Dragonflies zipped across the surface of the river as it began to ripple. A young woman emerged from the water, wearing nothing but a flowing gown of fine mist. She stepped gently over the grass towards Benedek's tree. He quickly scrambled away, knowing that he must be careful—his mother had always warned him to stay away from nymphs and never accept their hand for a dance.

But she was so beautiful; he was bewitched by the vision before him. Her slender body, her long honey-colored hair, and green eyes were entrancing. He couldn't tear his gaze away until the crunch of footsteps snapped him out of it. It was Tamas, his neighbor, walking straight towards the willow tree where the nymph now danced. The moon was rising as Tamas reached for her outstretched hand. "Tamas, no!" he shouted, but it was too late. Benedek ran home as fast as he could, breathlessly relaying the scene to his mother.

The following morning, they returned to the tree. There was no sign of Tamas or the nymph. The only indication of anything strange was a ring of long, lush grass around the tree. Benedek's mother clasped her hands together and whispered, "Rusalka!"

Across eastern Europe and Russia, a rusalka was a nature spirit with pagan origins. They were often linked with agricultural fertility, as they rose from the rivers and gave nurturing water to the crops. Similar to mermaids and sirens, rusalki took the form of beautiful young women who were enchanting to men.

Around the banks of the Danube, the rusalki were known to bewitch human men with their beautiful songs. In Russia, rusalki were considered older, unkempt, and aggressive: they ambushed unsuspecting men rather than enticing them. In Poland, rusalki were younger if they inhabited waterways or older if they lived in the forests. In all cases, if you looked at them closely, their hair would turn green, and their faces would distort, revealing their actual appearance.

Local variations could reflect the different agriculture in the regions. Growing conditions were favorable along the banks of the Danube, so the rusalki were seen in a more generous and positive light. The rusalki had more negative connotations in northern Russia, where the climate is harsher, and harvests were not as bountiful.

The poem '*Rusalka*' by Alexander Pushkin, from 1819, describes an alluring rusalka:

There was once an old hermit who had spent the summer praying, studying sacred texts, and fasting in a grove by a lake. Feeling he was nearing the end of his life, he dug his own grave and prayed for the blessings of the saints.

One evening, as it was getting dark, the hermit was praying as usual. He suddenly felt inexplicably troubled and afraid and looked towards the lake where the mists were lifting off the water. The waves grew twice as tall as usual and then became calm again. Then, a pale, naked maiden lightly stepped ashore and sat silently on the bank gazing at him and brushing her hair and the water from her arms. She was luscious and seductive as she beckoned him over, but when he did not go, she disappeared back into the lake.

That night, the hermit did not sleep, and the next day he did not pray. When evening came, the rusalka appeared again, trying to lure him to her at the water's edge with seductive

sounds and gestures. On the third night, the hermit was waiting for her on the shore, and by morning, he was gone. Although, a crowd of merchants was heard saying they had seen a gray beard floating in the water.

In the 19th Century, rusalki legends took a darker turn, pivoting towards more vengeful enticement of unsuspecting men to their deaths. In the newer retellings, a rusalka was an undead spirit, neither mortal nor immortal, that may have drowned or been murdered near the water. For example, if a woman took her own life in the water or was drowned intentionally by someone else, she would live out the rest of her years on earth as a rusalka. Some stories indicate that a rusalka was a mistress to a married man who fell pregnant with a child that her partner did not want, so he drowned them both to avoid confessing to his wife.

The rusalki were said to be at their most dangerous during Rusalki Week in early June. During this time, the rusalki came out of the rivers to sing and dance and must be avoided at all costs. To placate any ill feelings the rusalki may have towards the villagers, offerings of eggs and garlands would sometimes be left, and a birch tree could be named in their honor. At the end of the week, there would be a ritualistic burial or banishment of the rusalki to keep them off the land in an effort to keep the menfolk safe for the rest of the year.

Conclusion

The role of myth, folklore, and legend was to explain the unknown, provide cautionary tales that warned against dangers, promote moral virtues, and offer spiritual messages to give a sense of hope and purpose.

Myths, folktales, and legends also take the opportunity to present certain qualities as virtues. Moral virtues are usually exemplified by heroes in epic tales, and monsters are used to make the hero look good by comparison, highlighting their bravery and daring. This is the case for many popular Greek stories including the tales of Perseus and Medusa, Hercules and Orthrus, Susanoo and Yamata no Orochi, Thor and Jörmungandr, and Zeus and Typhon, to name a few.

Sacrificing virgin maidens leads us onto another theme from ancient mythologies in particular. Many myths were recorded when writing was done by men to be read or studied by men, and thus they reflect the patriarchal societies that were prevalent at the time, though there must have been many other stories that have been lost because they were not written down. In the remaining records of Greek mythology, physical abuse is not uncommon, though it is often glossed over in contemporary accounts, or alternative versions are favored to show consensus. For example, scholars commonly agree that Poseidon had his way with Medusa and Demeter, but alternative accounts of courting in flower-filled meadows were favored as societies changed.

Greek mythology, in particular, has a tendency to portray beautiful women with what it termed undesirable characteristics, such as independence and power, as half-beast, as if those characteristics go against nature itself. They are written as

warnings to men; women may appear beautiful, but they were believed to be untrustworthy, manipulative, and sure to bring downfall to man. For example, Medusa used to be very beautiful but could now turn men to stone, Echidna was beautiful but deadly with her own agenda, and later versions of Lamia were as a deadly seductress, much like the Slavic Rusalka who tempted men into the water. So the message was that men should control their lust and women should be kept as subordinates. Even though Greek mythology had many powerful female monsters, they were seen as abominations, cautioning men of the true inner nature of women if they were given any freedom.

Interestingly, the tale of Bakunawa from the Philippines shows excessive female lust. The goddess couldn't possess the moon spirit she desires, so she sought to destroy all seven moons. This is another example of uncontrolled human desires bringing ruin. An exception to the part-woman heralding destruction theme is Buraq, with a human face on a horse's body; she is female but not sexualized due to the spiritual significance of being a vehicle for prophets. While selkies can be male or female, they are both usually objects of lust, and the tales invariably end in heartbreak, a type of personal destruction.

Most mythologies had powerful female goddesses, but they often represented female spheres of life like childbearing and marriage and almost always acted strongly to uphold the patriarchy, lending it legitimacy. An example of this is the goddess Athena punishing Medusa for violating her shrine, despite Medusa being the victim of molestation by a male god. Often goddesses and mortal women in Greek mythology were only there to help the male hero, get rescued and marry someone, or give birth to someone.

Hindu society was also patriarchal, so the Hindu epics are populated with male heroes too, as is Japanese mythology. However, there is a broader range of female and genderless

deities in Hindu mythology. There are also female goddesses in Norse mythology, but the main characters in any story are the male gods. Norse society in terms of the Vikings is sometimes considered more equal in popular culture than it likely was. While both men and women had daily chores around the farmstead, women were in charge of childcare, and only men could take up roles outside the home like law and politics. Like Greek society, where the exception was that a woman could become a priestess, in Norse society, a woman could become a sorceress, which was seen as a role too effeminate for a man. However, it is suggested that being a competent mother and housewife was genuinely valued and not looked down upon as in some modern-day societies.

So, in a patriarchal society with male inheritance, women were required to provide legitimate heirs. A woman knew the child she gave birth to was hers, whereas the man may not be so sure if he did not trust his wife. If women were subordinate and kept under control, men would know (or at least think they did) that their children were actually their legitimate heirs. And the myths, written by men in ancient patriarchal societies, reflected this.

Though the societies we live in have changed, some things have not. The human brain is still wired for story. It is human nature to wonder at the world, consider what types of behavior can help us live a good life, and seek comfort and hope in difficult times. And we do this by communicating with one another; storytelling just happens to be one of the oldest methods of achieving this. Many ancient myths, folktales, and legends echo familiar human existential concerns about life, such as *'Who am I?'*, *'Why am I here?'* and other universal questions that persist to this day.

References

Note from the Author:

None of this work would have been possible without the breadth of knowledge that already exists out there. I, Zayden Stone, hope to be able to add to the wealth of references for all future folklorists. To write this book, I have spent hours carefully going through different sources. And with that I'd like to remind the reader, that a non-fiction book is always a result of best efforts. Mythologies and folktales present an interesting opportunity where the stories have multiple renditions based on the author. So I hope the reader absorbs this book in the same vein - a perspective and not an absolute truth.

Scorpion-man

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About the Author

Zayden Stone is a self proclaimed folklorist. As a child, while he watched his cousins and friends play with action figurines, he was swallowed up by the world of mythology. He let the stories of ancient cultures transport him to an imaginary world where magical beasts roamed the planet freely. He would often re-imagine these stories told from the perspective of these mythical creatures and would wonder what they would have had to say.

It has been a life long dream of Zayden's to combine all the creatures that he has grown up reading about, into a comprehensive illustrated guide for others to read. This book is an ode to his own childhood and fascination for ancient tales.

About the Artist

Herdhian is a freelance Graphic Designer and illustrator based in Indonesia. He has always loved to draw, whether by hand or digitally. He has a special interest in illustrating dark art characters because he feels that he can pour his emotions into it. When not drawing, he is busy being the IT Support at a school.